

Gene of Isis

THE MYSTIQUE TRILOGY
BOOK ONE

TRACI HARDING

HARPER

Voyager

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To my husband David and daughter Sarah for all their love and support throughout my pregnancy and the writing of this book and for John, our new addition—welcome to the family

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LIST OF CHARACTERS

19th Century

Ashlee Granville, the Honourable Miss Granville *Heroine*
Lord Thomas Granville, Baron of Suffolk *Ashlee's Father*
Lady Granville, Baroness of Suffolk (Margaret) *Ashlee's Mother*
Lord Eric Cavandish *Earl of Derby*
Lady Vanessa Cavandish *Countess of Derby*
Susan, The Honourable Miss Cavandish *The Earl of Derby's daughter*
Lord Simon Cavandish *The Earl of Derby's son*
Sir Damian Cavandish *The Earl of Derby's brother*
Mrs Beatrice Winston (Beat) *Ashlee's nanny*
Dr Rosen *Psychiatrist*
Lady Charlotte, Dowager Countess Cavandish *Ashlee's Governess*
Lord James Devere *The Earl of Oxford*
Mr Earnest Devere *The Earl of Oxford's younger brother*
Miss Catherine Devere *The Earl of Oxford's sister*
Lord Douglas Hamilton *Viscount of Herefordshire*
Clarissa Hamilton *The Viscount of Herefordshire's deceased wife*
Mr Frederick Hamilton *The Viscount of Herefordshire's cousin*
Albray Devere *Spirit of the Red Gnome*
Chiara *Dead gypsy witch*
Christian Molier *Curator, Arsenal Library, Paris*
Cingar Choron *Gypsy outlaw*
Chavi Choron *Chiara's grand-daughter*
Rumer Choron *Cingar's sister*
Gasgon de Guise *Duke of Orleans*
Jessenia *Gypsy bride*
Danior Terkari *Masked bandit*
Falcone Bellacino (Captain Falco) *Italian mariner*
Lord Malory *Grand Master of the Sangreal knighthood*
Mr Banks *English Consul in Alexandria*

21st Century

Mia Montrose *Archaeologist/Ancient Languages*

Andre Pierre *French Archaeologist*

James Conally (JC) and Christian Molier C & N *Excavation*

Tusca Resi *Molier's secretary*

Akbar *Guide in the Sinai*

Kadar Akbar's *subordinate*

Kamali Akbar's *subordinate*

Marty Chopper *pilot*

13th Century

Lillet du Lac *Guardian of the Keys*

Lilutu du Lac *Lillet's sister*

Pierre-Roger Mirepoix *Lord of Montségur*

Guillaume de Lahille *First Knight*

Bernard de Saint-Martin *First Knight*

Guillaume de Balaguire *First Knight*

Jean Ray *Courier*

Hugues de Archis *King's man*

Pierre Amiel, Archbishop of Narbonne *Inquisition Representative*

Marie de Saint-Clair *Grand Master of Sion*

Pierre de Saint-Martin *Credenti guardian*

Albray Devere *Sion Knight*

Christian Molier *Sion Knight*

PROLOGUE

FROM THE POST-SINAI JOURNALS OF LADY ASHLEE GRANVILLE-DEVERE

Those who have known me during my life would tell you that it is highly appropriate that I was born in 1817, at the dawn of the steam age. I never had a problem letting off steam, getting steamed, or steaming right on ahead.

As the only daughter of the Baron of Suffolk—the Honourable Lord Granville—you would think my youthful days would have left me with little to complain about. Had I been born the conformist my parents desired, I would have had no grievance with them and I would not have shamed them as I did. Had I been the son and heir my father desired, I would still have spent my life at loggerheads with him, and my name would still be Ashlee Granville, except my first name would end in a ‘y’. I dare say I would have loved the freedom of speech that being male would have awarded me, but even so my perceptions and opinions would still have been swept under the carpet.

For what I once thought was my father’s disapproval I now know was his fear and guilt, which no amount of impressing could have dispelled.

It was not my fault that I was born with the gift to hear the unsaid in everyone and everything. Furthermore, it was a prerequisite of my breeding not to suffer bigots, liars, cheats and hypocrites: who could sit idly by and watch such creatures make fools and sport of good people? Certainly not I.

Let me explain.

As a young child I assumed that anyone could tune in to the inner thoughts of those around them and to the impressions that people left on objects they came into contact with, so that everything said and done in the course of the waking hours seemed to me to be a comical charade for the sake of pleasantness. You thought one thing and then said precisely what everyone else wanted to hear, even if it meant betraying your own judgement. If everyone could hear what you were really thinking, then why not say it out loud? In fact, why bother speaking at all? My attempts to

rectify this silly process always ended in many gasps, arguments among the adults, being sent to my room, and tears—usually my own. I learned that the everyday verbal charade of lies did keep the peace, and so I too mastered how to play the game to appease and please my betters.

Thankfully, there was one person in my world who truly cared for me and had my best interests at heart and that sentinel was my Nanny, Beat—shortened from Beatrice. She was the first to realise I had a gift, one of an otherworldly nature that only last century would have seen me burned as a witch. Nanny Beat was not a well-educated woman, yet she was smart enough to teach me to keep my observations to myself. Had my talents been limited to just the one ability, it might have been possible to keep my psychic talent hidden. But, as any good psychic will tell you, otherworldly phenomena come in myriad forms, and at the most unexpected moments. How can a child choose between what is commonplace and what is not, when, for a child, every experience is new and extraordinary?

For as long as I can remember all I ever wanted to do was explore. Until I mastered the art of reading, and even of sitting still long enough to listen to a story, all my adventures took place in the great outdoors on our estates—my father had several, and we moved from one to the other, at the right season, as was the custom of the socially ambitious. I adored the creatures of nature: the unusual creatures tending the land, and the others that fed and lived off the land. Most people thought the former were but characters in fables, because when I spoke of them to the adults, I received vague smiles and a pat on the head. I later discovered that my mother, assuming Nanny Beat to be filling my head with fairytales, had often spoken sharply to her on this subject. Nanny never let on that the true source of my inspiration was my own perception.

I was aware that a large number of disembodied spirits dwelt on our estates, both in the manor houses and in their grounds. I chose to ignore them as they were, in the main, bitter spirits and not very good company. I could easily discern the dead, as shades lacked the colourful light-body at the core of every living thing.

‘Shades’ is a term I came to use later in life when referring to the majority of ghosts, as they are merely shadows of their former souls—the unwanted and unneeded rubbish left behind by the spirit after it has

ascended to higher places. Shades is indeed the more appropriate name for these forms.

During my formative years I learned how to more accurately read the colours people emitted via their light-body, but certain assumptions came naturally while I was still a youngster; like, stay away from people sporting big muddy patches! And only approach Father when his light-body is expanded, as this meant he was in a good mood.

When an individual was generating ample amounts of energy from the light centres of their subtle form, the light-body would grow in size, it would become less dense and more light filled. The light-body would reach out to feed, nurture and exchange energy with any living thing that it came into contact with via its expanded form. But when an individual had been sucked dry of life energy, the light-body would retract close to the body to form a kind of shield, until the energy levels were replenished and it could again contribute to the world around it.

It had not escaped my parents' notice that I had an uncanny knack for finding lost items, and that I could predict events such as the weather, unexpected guests and so forth. This aspect of my nature was widely accepted by everyone at the house and it was praised by my parents, as it seemed harmless—until the summer of 1825, which was just prior to my eighth birthday.

PART 1

ASHLEE

19TH CENTURY

ENGLAND

LESSON 1

CHILDHOOD

FROM THE CHILDHOOD JOURNALS OF MISS ASHLEE GRANVILLE

The visiting Earl of Derby, Lord Cavandish, who had attended Oxford University with my father, was staying at our estate en route home to Derby from Europe. His wife, Lady Cavandish the Countess of Derby, accompanied him.

They had arrived in the afternoon and yet, come evening, our guests had not relaxed. Lord Cavandish had lost, from his pocket, his father's dying gift to him—a fob watch. The lord was beside himself trying to figure where the watch could have gone, or if and when it could have been stolen.

Silently annoyed to have his important Nationalist discussions constantly derailed by his associate's concerns, Father sent up to the nursery for me.

'It's like a sixth sense with her,' I heard Father say as I approached down the hall, and the jovial tone in which he spoke made me proud; it was rare he spoke of me at all, let alone to boast about my unusual talents. 'As this...*additional* sense of my daughter's is rather extraordinary, we do try to keep it to ourselves, you understand? Still, as it seems to be the only course of action that might ease your mind, I trust you will keep the details of anything that occurs under your hat.'

'My dear Lord Suffolk, that goes without saying,' Lord Cavandish assured my father.

As our house in Suffolk was the estate to which the Granville peerage of baron was attached, my father was referred to in conversation as Lord Suffolk, my mother as Lady Suffolk. This was also true of Lord Cavandish, who would be referred to in conversation as Lord Derby, as it was to his estate in Derby that his title of earl was attached. Only in a letter or a written invitation would the Lord and Lady Cavandish be referred to as the Earl and Countess of Derby. Likewise a baron and his wife were never

spoken of or addressed as ‘Baron and Baroness’ by their peers or superiors, but were always referred to as ‘Lord and Lady’ of whatever county their highest family peerage and estate was located within. One could be an earl in one county and a baron in another, whereby the lower title and estate could be passed on to the eldest son, until such time as he inherited the higher title of earl and passed the lesser title of baron on to his eldest son.

‘Do you really think your daughter shall be able to locate my treasure?’ The earl sounded desperately hopeful, and quite intrigued.

‘I’d place money on it,’ my father warranted, ‘and you know that I am not a gambling man.’

Nanny Beat knocked on the door of my father’s private library and when he responded with an ‘Enter’, Nanny gave me the nod to proceed. As I was formally introduced to the Earl of Derby, I deduced that he was outwardly more happy than he was inwardly.

The lord’s light-body was dulled, especially around his heart, and yet I sensed he was not a bad person—more a victim of torment than a tormentor. Then I noted what appeared to be a dark, ghostly knife driven through his back and into his heart. I’d never seen such a thing before and it appeared to be very painful. Still, he didn’t seem to be aware of it and I knew better than to mention my observation.

‘My dear Lord Derby has lost an item that is very precious to him, Ashlee.’

I marked that my father did not name the item, which gave me the opportunity to show off. The answer was too easy, for it was foremost in the man’s mind. ‘A watch,’ I said, and the lord’s smile broadened in disbelief. He suspected that I might have overheard them talking.

My father was also smiling. ‘Do you think you could tell us what has become of this item?’

I nodded. ‘If I may put my hand in the pocket from which the watch went missing?’

Happy to oblige, the lord held open the left side of his deep blue coat to expose his silken gold waistcoat. Yet, unlike the right-handed majority of men who did carry their watch in their left pocket, the Lord Cavandish was left-handed and I sensed this. When I say I sensed this, I mean that my inner voice alerted me to the deception and I acted upon the information—my inner knowing never steered me wrong.

I didn't have to look up to know that Lord Cavandish was giving my father an impressed look as my hand examined the right-side pocket of his waistcoat. I perceived a vivid image of the watch, as it had resided in this pocket, and I shivered, inexplicably consumed by a deathly cold chill, although the evening was warm.

The Earl of Derby must have dozed off in the carriage at some stage, as the watch was turned on its side, and it had slid out of the pocket into the lord's jacket. When he stood to exit the carriage, the watch fell onto the carriage seat and slipped down the back into a timber void there.

I came out of my short trance and withdrew my hand from the nobleman's pocket. 'I believe the watch is still in your carriage, Lord Derby.'

'But I had the carriage searched.' Lord Cavandish felt that I had just opted for the easiest and most logical conclusion.

'Shall I have your carriage brought around to the front of the house?' my father asked.

'I see no harm in having a second look,' Lord Cavandish agreed, to humour his host.

By the time the carriage was at the front driveway of the manor, my mother and Lady Cavandish had also joined us. Nanny Beat was observing quietly from the front door.

'You may proceed, child.' Father gave me leave to retrieve the item from the carriage.

I skipped down the stairs and was aided into the coach by the coachman. I went to the spot on the forward-facing seat where the watch had done its disappearing act, and stuck my tiny hand into the gap between the padded seat and the backrest. My fingers probed every nook and cranny until I found the missing item, which had slipped into the far corner, quite beyond the reach of someone with a larger arm.

'Here it is!' I held up the watch in triumph as I exited the carriage, and immediately noticed an extra nobleman standing among those cheering my success.

He was not one of the living, for there was no colour in his light-body. In fact, his life force was all concentrated within his head area, and the rest of his being was just a shadow the same as the shades that haunted our

estates. It appeared that his spirit was weighed down by the mistakes of his earthly life, which were preventing him from moving on. Hence, this manifestation was a ghost in the true sense of the word.

My shocked expression did not go unnoticed.

‘What is it, child?’ my father inquired impatiently.

Don’t be afraid, said the ghostly fellow, finely attired in a slightly out-of-date suit. *My brother*, he motioned to Lord Cavandish, *is in great danger and you’re the only person who can help me warn him in time.*

‘Answer me, Ashlee!’ Father demanded, whereby my petrified eyes jumped to look at my father.

‘Sorry, papa,’ I mumbled, knowing he would not want me to state my woes in front of his esteemed guests. I looked back to the ghostly presence descending the stairs toward me.

Tell him the truth, Miss Granville. It will be to your advantage, I promise.

But I knew from prior experience that it would *not* be to my advantage—the truth never was.

The lives of my brother and his family depend on you, the ghost told me. *I’m sorry I must place such a burden on your tiny shoulders, but you are the only channel open to me—*

‘Ashlee!’ Father’s patience came to an end.

‘There is a ghost, papa,’ I stammered, ‘and he insists that he is the brother of Lord Derby, come to warn that their family is in danger.’

‘What?’ gasped the earl and his wife, whilst my father’s angry astonishment steadily snowballed to render him speechless. Lord Cavandish recovered his wits swiftly. ‘It is true my brother is deceased...he died in very mysterious circumstances.’ It surprised everyone that the earl would award me his interest, patience and, more astonishingly, his confidence. ‘It has been like a dagger in my heart to think that my brother would not come to me for help before circumstances became so desperate that he would take his own life!’

Everybody gasped as one, except the ghost and me.

‘Mr Cavandish, have your wits taken their leave?’ demanded his wife. They had obviously gone to great lengths to keep the suicide a secret. ‘You have no place raising such issues with a child!’

Thus was the guilt of the first son and heir to an earldom. The younger brother had had little by comparison and Lord Cavandish couldn't help but feel partly responsible for his brother's sad end. I had hit an emotional nerve and the lifeblood of the lord's guilt had come pouring out; even he now looked surprised at his reaction.

'I see the dagger in your heart, my lord.' I gamely defended the earl as he had defended me. 'I understand that there is unrest in a good heart that should be at peace.'

All eyes turned my way. My father would have apprehended me at once, but he saw fit to apologise to Lord Cavandish first, who wouldn't hear a bar of it. His focus remained on me. 'How do you see these things, Miss Granville?'

Allow me to handle this. The ghost knelt before me on one knee to beseech my permission.

I nodded, unaware of what I was really agreeing to. There was a rush of stabbing cold, reminiscent of the chill I felt when I had first sought the whereabouts of the watch. It seemed likely that this spectre had caused the watch to go missing, specifically so that I might find it.

The rest of that night I can only recall from my Nanny Beat's account of what followed.

'Don't feel guilty, Eric.' I stood tall to say this to the Earl of Derby, the deep male voice emanating from my mouth a shock to one and all. 'I didn't take my own life, my life was stolen from me.'

'Damian?' Lord Cavandish was mortified to recognise his brother's voice, and he caught Lady Cavandish as she fainted.

My parents were too stunned for rational thought and nobody dared move as Lord Cavandish pursued his answers.

'You were murdered, dear brother? By whom?'

'Her name is Miss Eleanora Parks.'

'A woman?' My father was surprised to learn the murderer's gender.

'A woman with several large brothers,' Damian replied.

'We have a governess named Mrs Eleanora Parks.' The earl looked a little panicked as he stated this.

'Well, Miss Parks would have to be known as Mrs,' Damian explained, 'to disguise the fact that her son was the bastard of a nobleman.'

Now Lord Cavandish was turning pale. ‘What are you saying, Damian?’

‘I took advantage of Miss Parks once and she in turn took revenge upon me!’

‘Oh, dear god.’ My mother crossed herself and retreated to the house, for she couldn’t listen to any more.

‘I must believe your confession, Damian.’ Lord Cavandish was appalled. ‘Was there no end to your wretchedness?’

‘Fear not, dear brother, because Miss Parks put an end to me,’ Damian retorted in spite. ‘She had me trapped and then tortured until I would recognise the child she carried as my own. She forced me to marry her and then she had me hanged!’

‘Oh, my god,’ gasped Lord Cavandish, as he took a step backward. Damian had been found hanging from the rafters of a cheap hotel room.

‘Now there is only a handful of lives standing between Miss Parks and her son inheriting the entire Cavandish estate! I know I caused you grief while I was alive, Eric. I hated being second-in-line and I never did much to improve upon my lot. However, you and yours do not deserve to die by *that* woman’s hand. Your children are already ailing with her poisons...please, *go home immediately!* Before it is too late for your heirs...’

Despite my father’s assurances that I was quite likely ill, and certainly delusional, Lord Cavandish and his wife left for home in all haste. My father had been greatly looking forward to having some intelligent male company and my little flight of fancy had brought that to an abrupt end. He should have known better than to encourage my delusions, he raged to himself—was Ashlee possessed?

Thomas Granville was not a religious man, although he followed the teachings of the Church of England as befitted his social standing. He was a Nationalist, and a keen follower and supporter of the sciences, technologies, business and commerce, all of which, to his mind, were often hindered by the superstitions of the church! He had belonged to a secret brotherhood at one time, and although he appreciated the social connections available to him through such a society, he’d found their initiations too ritualistic for his liking. During the incident that had led him to abandon the society, Thomas was pretty sure he’d been drugged. The memory made him shiver, but he

pushed it back into the dark recesses of his memory to consider more pressing matters.

Perhaps Ashlee was insane?

Now that was an easier premise to stomach. His daughter needed a psychiatrist not a priest!

LESSON 2

INSANITY

A deep peace and tranquillity lingered over my being as I began to stir from my slumber. I didn't want to wake, for there was a wise and loving presence in my dreams that I desired to remain with. Consciousness erased the details of the character and with the scene that greeted my awakening my inner tranquillity departed, the message and existence of my celestial friend forgotten.

My parents were standing over me. My mother appeared tormented, her hands stroking each other nervously. My father wore a frown deeper than any that had ever shadowed his face, in my memory. Nanny Beat was at my side, and although she clearly wanted to speak and ask how I was, she did not dare speak first.

'You have shamed me deeply, daughter,' my father told me, in a voice calmer than one would expect. Clearly I had caused my father great worry, for there was a large muddy patch in his light-body that encompassed his entire head and there was another over his heart. 'But I do not blame you, child, as I believe your mind is ailing, and so I have called upon a doctor to examine you.' Father motioned to a round, elderly man who stood at the foot of my bed. 'This is Dr Rosen. He specialises in disorders of the young mind.'

Every part of this man's light-body was dark, with some spots very black. Around him stood a multitude of dead children that were ghosts in the true sense of the word. I suspected they had died a quick, untimely and traumatising death and so were trapped in the physical world, not knowing they had passed on, or they had some other grave reason for hanging around on earth to haunt this man.

We named him Black Rose, said a boy, aged about twelve.

Do not let him near you, warned a little girl, not much older than myself. His true interest in children is unnatural—

More *interested in your private parts than your mind*, said another lad, a few years older, who really did seem rather deranged. *Know what I mean?* He winked.

I gasped and began to tremble. I did not know what he meant and I didn't want to know.

'Come now, there's no need to be afraid,' said Father, 'this is for your own good. We just want you cured of whatever this affliction is.'

That's what they all say, a frighteningly sane lad added. *And once the Black Rose pronounces you round-the-twist, it won't do no good to tell anyone what he really gets up to, 'cause you're MAD!*

He's *got all manner of restraining devices at his disposal*, said an older girl, aged in her early teens. *And if you resist or make trouble then...* Her head suddenly jerked to one side and fell loose to her shoulders, like a necked animal!

I screamed, and continued to scream as every child in turn repeated the violent motion of having their necks broken.

'Leave her with me,' said the doctor calmly, whereby I screamed even louder and grabbed for Nanny Beat.

'No! Nanny, don't leave me, don't leave me with him. He's the *darkest ever*.'

Nanny knew what this meant, and although she would normally have complied with my father's direction to leave, her resolve hardened like stone. 'I beg pardon, lord, but I believe Miss Granville needs someone to reassure her during the doctor's visit—'

'Dr Rosen requests that we *leave*, Mrs Winston.' My father had a cautionary tone to his voice. 'He comes very highly recommended, I assure you.'

Aye, for getting rid of problem children, commented one of the younger lads, to the morbid amusement of the others, as their heads returned to normal.

'And why should it be necessary to see the child alone and in distress?' Nanny looked at the doctor accusingly.

'Because a child will behave and respond differently with familiar people around, people who are probably already giving support to the delusions. And when I am assessing a child patient, any adult present will

be tempted to answer on behalf of the child, which can influence their answers. Need I go on?’

Nanny knew nothing about psychology, and she knew she risked dismissal by protesting further. Still, if they carted me away and locked me up, then she’d lose her position anyway. ‘Beg pardon, lord, but it is my job to see to your daughter’s best interests and I cannot see how distressing her further will aid her condition. Please allow me—’

‘Mrs *Winston*.’ My father’s voice got quieter when he was really angry. ‘I do not wish my child to be mollycoddled any longer. That is why she is now in this state!’

I had seen my father dismiss servants for much less and to forestall the risk of losing Nanny, I calmed myself. ‘I was just startled,’ I announced, trying to stabilise my breathing, although my heart was pounding in my throat. ‘I shall be fine,’ I assured Nanny. ‘I am sorry to have caused distress, papa.’

‘That sounds more like my offspring.’ He was reassured and his frown lifted.

I watched Nanny and my mother and father leave the room, with a feeling of terror in my heart.

Find a weapon, urged one of the younger girls.

The truth is my weapon. I quietly decided this was how I should combat the dark doctor; the truth seemed to hurt everyone else, so it was certainly worth a try.

‘Now, Miss Granville...’ The doctor came forward to seat himself on the bed beside me, whereupon I pointed to a chair. Sneering, he complied, as I threatened to retreat to the other side of the large four-poster bed if he did not. ‘Why is a sweet little girl like you so fascinated with dead people? Hmmm.’

‘And why are dead children so fascinated with *you*, doctor?’ My response shook him a little, for his dark spots churned and blackened even further, although I would have thought that impossible.

‘I lose patients sometimes, as do all doctors, and my patients are children.’ He used a very calm, patronising tone of voice.

‘And exactly how does a mind illness end in a broken neck?’ I frowned, inwardly elated by my frankness, knowing he could hardly repeat

my accusations for fear of attracting attention to the number of his patients who died.

‘Now you’ve lost me,’ he said, but the look on his face betrayed his curiosity. ‘I think you are a very sick little girl...’

I took up the challenge. ‘Not half as sick as you, I expect.’ One thing I had learned about dark spots was that they were indicative of the body’s dis-ease; if these blockages were not cleared, the parts of the body enshrouded would start to crumble under the pressure.

The most concentrated areas of blackness in the doctor’s light-body were over his genitals, his spleen, his heart and his brow. ‘You had best make your peace with your maker, doctor, for you shall be a ghost yourself before too long.’ I felt confident at predicting this, and when the ghostly rabble of children cheered my words, I grinned.

Dr Rosen wasn’t looking quite so superior now; in fact he appeared to be distinctly rattled. Could he hear the cheers of his victims? Or had I hit upon something else?

‘It is true my health has been failing lately,’ he admitted, and looked at me curiously. ‘Can you tell me something about my illnesses?’

He wasn’t just humouring me. He suspected I was psychically gifted and he was hoping I knew of a cure for his ailments.

‘There is only one cure for what you have,’ I stated, and in his expression I saw curiosity snowball into anticipation.

‘Well, what is it?’ The doctor urged me to be out with it. ‘If you tell me, I feel sure that I could convince your parents that your little case of possession was just a minor brain malfunction, curable with lots of sweets.’

Don’t tell him. Let him die, yelled the youngest of the children, a boy of only five. The other victims echoed his sentiment, afraid that I was going to betray them to save my own skin.

‘It’s very simple really,’ I said cooperatively. ‘If you want a miracle cure, you must stop your unnatural acts against children.’ The doctor stood in shock as he heard my remedy. ‘Confess your sins to the parents of those you have deceived and beg them to pray for your rotting soul.’

The doctor was fuming, fit to burst. ‘I can see you are badly in need of my *personal* observation.’ He made it sound a threat. ‘I shall be advising your parents to admit you to the asylum immediately! A *private* room, of course.’

‘I will name names,’ I in turn, threatened, as the children began reciting their names to me. ‘Julie Fergus, Malcolm Peterson, James St Claire, Rachael Morrow—’

‘I see.’ The doctor opened his black bag. ‘Then I think it’s time for your medication.’

I ran, but he caught me. I resisted swallowing the potion, but Dr Rosen was used to forcing tranquillising substances down the throat of a young child. I sobbed in defeat as the foul-tasting brew burned down my throat and I began to feel bleary.

‘We shall have much fun and games, you and I.’ The doctor held my face in his two hands and made me focus on his eyes. ‘You’re very lovely.’ The way he said this made my skin crawl and I cried out as he licked my cheek, but my voice had lost all volume.

I blamed Damian Cavandish for my predicament. I had known the truth would end in my punishment—it always did.

Three days saw Lord Cavandish back at our country estate in Suffolk. Naturally, my father was pleased to see his dear friend, until he learned the reason for the lord’s return visit. The earl had brought with him his Great Aunt Charlotte, who had arrived from France at the lord’s manor in Derbyshire on the same day that Lord Cavandish had sped home to investigate my story.

The Dowager Countess Cavandish had been the most acclaimed psychic in London at one time. She’d been living abroad since her second husband, Lord John Cavandish, Earl of Derby, had departed this world some ten years before.

The lady explained to my father that Eric’s brother, Damian, notorious for his lies in life, had been spinning yarns since his death—at least she thought he’d been spinning yarns to her in order to cover up for his cowardly death. She had decided to ignore him, but in the last few years or so Damian’s appeals for her to act had become more frequent and desperate. The Dowager Countess had relented and made the journey to England to deliver Damian’s warning regarding Miss Parks, in person.

‘So you see, my Lord Suffolk, the Honourable Miss Granville was right about everything! My children were ailing from poison. We found the marriage document my brother spoke of, and Miss Parks, also known as

Mrs Cavandish, confessed to Damian's murder in return for our agreeing to spare her son any punishment.'

My father didn't know what to say, but sinking further into denial of my talents was so much easier than having to concede that unexplained phenomena were taking place under his own roof, or thinking about having to deal with my little outbursts for the rest of his life! 'My daughter is not a psychic!'

'Then how would you explain all this, Lord Suffolk?' the earl asked, wondering if he'd overlooked some more reasonable explanation.

'*Mental illness*,' Father pronounced, very definitely. 'And I'm having her condition seen to.'

The Dowager Countess Cavandish went ghostly white, and became mired in thought.

'I've had her committed to a very good—'

'*Committed!*' The Earl of Derby was horrified. 'For solving the mystery of my brother's death, for saving those dearest to me and the entire future of my family line, you've had that *blessed angel committed!*' My father had never seen his friend so irate. Lord Cavandish was a powerful man in the House of Lords who had similar ideals and visions to my father, so he had no desire to have a falling out with the earl over this matter.

'Do I question what you decide is best for your children?' Father defended his decision, although parental guilt at his hasty action was beginning to wear him down a little. We may not have had much of an affinity, but I was still his child and Father couldn't bear the thought that he hadn't done what was best for both of us.

'Thomas.' Lord Cavandish spoke in a most informal tone to try and share the revelations he'd had in the past few days. 'I've just finished telling you that I had no idea what was best for my children. I thought they were in the kindest of care. Nevertheless it is clear that I've been too wrapped up in my own business agenda to care what was truly best for my family. I should never have left my children in the care of a total stranger. Please, forgive my impertinence, old friend. I desire only that you draw some benefit from my mistake.'

My father felt a deep sense of alarm. The earl's words rang true and clearly Lord Cavandish had learned a very painful lesson, which my father had yet to confront—his own selfishness.

‘Your daughter is in great peril,’ Lady Cavandish announced, anxiety causing her calm tone to falter slightly. My father showed considerable restraint in not rolling his eyes, when she added: ‘A very dark presence has gained access to your beautiful daughter because of her selfless aid to our kin.’

Father hated it that he understood perfectly what the Dowager Countess was saying. ‘*He’s the darkest ever...*’ My father repeated the observation I had made to Nanny Beat about Dr Rosen, and the words stung at his heart like a thousand wasps. ‘Why must all the rubbish that spouts from that child’s mouth make such perfect sense?’ It was infuriating to my father. And it was totally bewildering. ‘That child will be the ruin of me.’ He stood up and resolved to take action and correct his oversight.

‘I can assure you, my Lord Granville, that quite the opposite is true.’ The Dowager Countess Cavandish rose from where she sat and asked: ‘Where is the Honourable Miss Granville now?’

‘The asylum is a few hours from here.’

Lady Cavandish heard and felt the panic that was rising in my father. ‘Fear not.’ She squeezed my father’s arm to reassure him. ‘Your daughter has many guardians watching over her...and my presence here today is a firm sign of that! All shall be well.’

My father was not the kind of man to graciously accept such comfort or admit that he should even need it, and especially not from a woman he’d never met before! But at this moment, he was mildly thankful for it.

‘Let us make haste then.’ Father turned toward the doors of the downstairs sitting room which led to the foyer, to find Nanny Beat standing in the doorway. ‘Yes, you may come,’ he replied before she’d even asked the question. ‘I wish to speak with you en route.’

Nanny burst into tears, she was so grateful. ‘Oh, thank you, my lord and god bless—’

‘No time for tears, woman.’ He put his arm around her, which he rarely did to anyone in public. ‘Lady Cavandish assures me that all shall be well, so let us waste no tears.’

Nanny nodded and gathered her wits.

‘My coach is out front,’ Lord Cavandish offered, ‘but what of the Lady Suffolk?’ He wondered whether my mother should be notified of the events taking place.

Father shook his head. 'This whole affair has left Mrs Granville ailing. Better that she sleep and awaken when it is all set right.'

I lay in a dingy little room, unconscious or delirious from the effects of the doctor's medication, for days. Thankfully, during my periods of semi-consciousness since arriving at the asylum, I hadn't sighted Dr Rosen—I hadn't really sighted anybody! The memory of that rotting, smelly man licking my face made my stomach turn and up came the little food I'd eaten. The medication, apart from its tranquillising effect, gave me cramps and made me very weak and unable to follow a train of thought.

I continued reciting the names of Dr Rosen's young victims as loud as my parched throat would allow, as this exercise served to keep my mind active. I couldn't see the ghostly children, but I still heard them repeating their names, one by one, in a continuous round, which I echoed aloud.

Keep heart, Miss Granville, help is coming.

Although my sights were blurry and my wits dulled, the face of Damian Cavandish was perfectly clear to my inner perception.

I've arranged everything, he said.

The dark evidence of Damian's guilt in early life had vanished. The gent was no longer a ghost, but a brilliant celestial being, whose appearance contained all that he might have been in life.

You look like an angel, I thought, too weak to speak.

Damian smiled, most pleased by his transformation. *All thanks to you, Miss Granville, I am free of my self-induced limbo...the matter of your future welfare is all that binds me to this earth.*

I felt a warm hand take hold of my own and, with a gentle tug, I was aided to rise to a seated position. I knew something impossible was happening: I'd been heavily sedated and yet I felt so light. Light enough to just float out of my body.

What is happening? I panicked as I realised I was floating apart from my body. *Am I dying?*

Just sleeping, assured the late Damian Cavandish. *And when you awake, all of your sweetest dreams will be answered...even the ones you haven't conceived of yet.*

The weakness and pain ebbed as I left it behind me on the bed—apart from peace and contentment I felt nothing at all. I was floating beside the

celestial gent, clutching his hand tightly as I observed my body in slumber. I *don't look at all well*, I decided—my form appeared to be so small and frail.

The door to my room unlocked and opened. Dr Rosen entered, accompanied by his usual entourage of ghosts, and two young, witless men who carried a stretcher. 'Sorry to have neglected you, my dear.' The doctor motioned his lads toward me. 'Take Miss Granville to my surgery...time for her long-overdue examination.'

The malign delight in the doctor's voice taunted me, and I was drawn back toward my ailing body. *For all my talents, I am defenceless like this!*

Do not fear. Damian clutched the hand of my light-body tightly, aiding my consciousness to remain at liberty from my form. *You have abilities beyond anything that you can imagine and, even though you are yet to master these, they can be utilised by other disembodied entities when you, as now, vacate your earthly vessel.*

We won't let him harm you, assured the eldest ghostly boy among the doctor's victims, *nor anyone, ever again.*

Damian's assurances, and those of the children, kept me calm as my body was transported through the asylum, up a winding staircase to a tower, where I was strapped to a table.

Help me, I appealed to my allies.

Not yet, one of the children advised. *Best that your body is safely strapped down before we deal with His Blackness.*

It will all be over soon, a girl assured me with a smile, as Dr Rosen dismissed his help and I was left all alone with the man.

'You're not going to sleep all the way through my consultation are you, Miss Granville?' The doctor finished cranking the table to an upright position and slapped me around the face a few times. 'This really would be far more enjoyable if you were awake.'

All shall be well, the ghostly children said as they took flight toward my body and vanished into it. As the last of them entered my form, my eyes parted wide.

The doctor turned back from selecting a large pair of scissors to find me conscious and was delighted. 'Ah, Miss Granville—'

'No!' A multiplicity of children's voices issued from my mouth and began to chant the same round of names I had been mumbling for days.

Shocked witless only for a moment, the doctor then raised the scissors he held, hoping to silence the rising din with a stab wound to my heart.

A short, sharp burst of energy shot forth from my restrained body. The force of the charge knocked the doctor to the floor as my hair flew out around my head.

‘You are possessed!’ Horrified, Rosen scrambled to his feet, but before he could make for the tower door an unseen force took hold of him and guided him to the desk. The doctor took up a pen and began to draw a map, which took some time to complete. ‘What is this?’ he cried. On another piece of paper he scribbled a few words that distressed him even more. ‘No! Don’t kill me. I shall die soon enough!’ The force controlling the doctor slowly swirled into a powerful whirlwind that set Rosen spinning—faster and faster.

As surgical instruments began to vibrate around the surgery, beginning to be sucked into the whirlwind, Damian decided it was time for us to depart the tower. *You have visitors*, he informed me as we passed through the tower door.

I do? The news raised my spirits, but it did not abate my concern. *They’re going to kill him, aren’t they?* In my heart I could feel the hatred and fear emanating from all sides. *It is not the right resolution. Until his dis-ease is corrected, death will not make him repent.*

My death brought about my repentance, Damian pointed out as we descended the stairs. *I had to find a way out of my torment and so will he. You shall be of far more benefit to this world, Miss Granville, and so it was right that you were spared from this man. Do not question why the Almighty saw fit for you to render this service to those unhappy ghosts today, but know that your soul is as free of blame as it ever was.*

I was delighted to encounter my father, Nanny Beat, Lord Cavandish, and a noble lady, on the stairway, trying to force their way past an asylum guard.

Who is the lady with my father? I pointed to the unfamiliar woman, for her light-body was more beautiful and developed than any other person I’d ever encountered.

That is my aunt, the Dowager Countess Cavandish, my guide was pleased to impart. *She is one of the most acclaimed psychics in Europe and your future tutor.*

Really? I forgot my woes, overjoyed by the prospect of meeting another psychic, let alone being tutored by one.

‘You can’t go up to the doctor’s surgery unannounced.’ The guard spread his arms wide to block the stairway.

‘Does Dr Rosen have something to hide?’ the stately Dowager Countess queried.

‘Surgery is sometimes a bloody business and no place for *ladies*.’ The large guard leered down at them, and his vantage point on the stairs made him seem more imposing.

‘There had better not be any blood,’ threatened my father. ‘That’s my daughter Rosen has up there.’

The men again tried to push their way past the guard, without success.

‘Have it your way.’ Father punched the huge fellow in the jaw. A punch to the stomach and another to the back of his head sent the guard flying.

‘Good show, Granville,’ Lord Cavandish commented, protecting the ladies as the guard fell down the stairs. ‘Your boxing days at Oxford weren’t entirely wasted.’

‘Pardon the spectacle.’ Father made haste to the tower and entered.

By the time the rest of the party reached the tower door, my father had returned to the doorway to block it. ‘Ladies, I would advise you to go no further.’

Nanny Beat gasped, fit for tears. ‘Mistress Ashlee?’

‘I’ll let you know.’ My father’s even tone cautioned her to be calm.

Lord Cavandish followed my father inside, as did the Dowager Countess Cavandish, whereby my father felt he must insist.

‘My dear woman—’

‘Whatever is in there, Lord Granville, I can assure you I have seen infinitely worse,’ the Dowager Countess said briskly. ‘I believe my line of work makes me more qualified to deal with the macabre than either of you two gentlemen.’

‘My aunt has a valid point,’ said Lord Cavandish, supporting his aunt’s plea, even as he looked over his shoulder at the dead man lying on the floor with all manner of surgical instruments extruding from his body. ‘Kings and dukes have consulted Aunt Charlotte on many delicate matters. It might be advisable to do the same in this instance.’

My father relented, opening the door only wide enough for the Dowager Countess to enter and then closed it behind them, leaving Nanny Beat to pace in the dim stairwell.

What has happened? I very much wanted to hug my poor Nanny and reassure her.

All is well, advised my celestial guardian. *You'll see.*

I awoke to see many worried faces lighten in relief; even my father seemed pleased to see me. He asked me how I was feeling. Did I remember anything?

‘I remember being taken to Dr Rosen’s tower,’ I replied, rather more unshaken than everyone had expected. My father seemed broken by this news.

‘Can you tell us what happened after that, Miss Granville?’ A new face was looming over the top of those of my father, Nanny Beat and Lord Cavandish.

‘This is Constable Forester,’ my father explained. ‘He is here to investigate what took place in Dr Rosen’s surgery this afternoon.’

The constable’s presence was most comforting to me and to the troubled spirits still hovering close by, waiting for an end to their plight; here was someone willing and able to investigate this tragedy.

I related to the constable how I had been taken to the tower and strapped to a table—just as if I’d been conscious the entire time. ‘Dr Rosen had been threatening to give me a *private* consultation, ever since we met.’

‘And did he examine you?’ the constable asked.

‘No.’ My reply brought much joy to my gathered friends. ‘The news of his imminent death had Dr Rosen preoccupied. He was consumed with fear for his eternal soul.’ I did as I’d been taught was best—I lied. It was surprising how easily the fabrication fell out of my mouth, almost as if it had been scripted and rehearsed. ‘The doctor said that he had an unnatural obsession with children and that he had murdered any of his patients who resisted his advances.’

My audience gasped and their faces became pale and shocked again, but not the constable.

‘Do you have any proof to substantiate these grave allegations?’

‘Indeed.’ The ghostly children had left a psychic memory, an impression in my mind, to let me know where the evidence lay. ‘Dr Rosen left a map of the asylum graveyard.’

The young constable held up a piece of paper upon which there were drawn many squares, some crossed through and some not.

I nodded. ‘The Xs mark where Dr Rosen’s victims lie. You’ll find all of them have a broken neck. Check the medical records, for that was not their reported cause of death.’

‘What happened after the doctor confessed to you?’ The constable was having trouble digesting my explanation. How to avoid the evident conclusion that the doctor had butchered himself in a fit of madness?

‘Dr Rosen made me take some medication and I fell asleep,’ I concluded neatly.

The constable thought over my words.

‘Well, thank you for your assistance, Miss Granville.’ He scratched his cheek as he considered the nightmarish investigation he was facing and how it might best be avoided. ‘Lord Suffolk, if I could have a word with you outside.’ My father agreed and followed Forester into the corridor.

I had been placed in one of the asylum’s private rooms, which was much more presentable than the one I’d spent the past few days in.

‘I was so worried, Mistress.’ Nanny finally got to express her relief at my good health, and caressed my hand affectionately.

‘How did you get papa to come?’ As Nanny was the only one who cared if I lived or died, I assumed it must have been her prompting that brought my father to my rescue, though I couldn’t imagine how.

‘Not I.’ Nanny motioned to Lord Cavandish, who was standing close by.

I smiled as the Earl of Derby came forward and bowed graciously to me, then knelt at my bedside and took my hand in his.

‘My dear Miss Granville. I am completely in your debt for the lives of my family and the future of my peerage. After rescuing my family, I returned to Suffolk to thank you in person, only to discover that you had been punished for your actions on my behalf. Upon realising his error, your father agreed to accompany me at once to see to your release.’

My smile broadened as I noticed the heaviness had lifted from the earl’s heart. ‘You also have your brother to thank for your deliverance, my

lord, for it was only his persistent desire to make amends that has removed the knife from your heart.'

'It is true,' he conceded. 'However, my brother had a great deal of help from you. And I fully intend to reward you.' The earl stood. 'May I introduce my aunt, the Dowager Countess Cavandish.'

And so it was that I met the most important influence on my young life.

'It is an honour...' I attempted to raise myself, but could not.

'Relax, my dear Miss Granville.' There was a trace of some European accent in her velvet voice. 'You have had a *big* day.'

'But I have so much I want to ask you,' I appealed. 'The late Damian Cavandish told me that you were the greatest psychic on the Continent.'

My claim drew laughter from the Dowager Countess. 'What a delight you are, child,' she said, and clasped her hands over her heart.

'It's true,' I insisted. 'He said that you were to be my tutor.'

The Dowager Countess Cavandish suppressed her delight. 'Would that please you?'

'It would be a dream come true, but—' I looked at Nanny Beat.

'Your servant would remain in your service, of course.' The countess addressed our unspoken fear. 'You would both have to move to Neith Manor, the Cavandish estate in Dumfries, of course. My nephew has persuaded me against returning to Europe, and has offered me our Dumfries residence to attend to the education of his daughter, Miss Susan Cavandish. In gratitude for your service, Lord Cavandish wishes to offer you the same education as his own daughter, who is only a year younger than yourself.'

Another child my own age to associate with! I could hardly contain my delight. When I further considered the Dowager Countess' credentials, I could not believe fortune would favour me so. 'Papa will never agree.'

'Miss Granville, our meeting is no coincidence,' the lady told me. 'Rest your troubled mind, child...leave the convincing to me.'

As I suspected, Father would not accept Lord Cavandish's gift, even at the risk of offending the earl. Besides being an expert in psychic learning, the Dowager Countess Cavandish knew Greek, Latin, French, Italian and even a little Hebrew. She was knowledgeable in mathematics, history, natural sciences and geography and she was very cultured when it came to the

social graces such as dancing and music, both vocal and instrumental. Not to mention that she was a damn fine shot, although the Dowager Countess Cavandish preferred to hunt game than fox. Under different circumstances my father would have paid handsomely for such a private tutor for his daughter, but he was a stubborn man.

Once I had returned home to Suffolk, however, the Dowager Countess Cavandish and the Earl of Derby visited our manor to appeal my father's decision. As fate would have it, Constable Forester arrived that same day to report to my father the findings of his investigation. As Father's guests had been intimately involved with the incident, it seemed fitting that they remain present to hear the constable's brief.

'It is the opinion of our undertaker that all the wounds suffered by Dr Rosen were so angled as to have been self-inflicted,' Forester said. 'Dr Rosen's personal physician confirmed that the old man was indeed dying. As the surgery tower is guarded and alternative access is impossible, we are satisfied with the Honourable Miss Granville's account of the facts. We find suicide is the probable cause of death in this instance. The case is now closed, and I shall take up no more of your time. I bid you all a good day.' The constable retreated to the door.

'One moment, Constable Forester.' The Dowager Countess Cavandish stood up to pursue the conversation, causing the gentlemen in her company to also rise to their feet. 'What is being done to investigate the *cause* of Dr Rosen's suicide?'

The constable drew a deep breath; he'd obviously hoped to avoid that topic. 'In order to exhume a body I must first have the family's permission. I do not feel it proper to add to the grief of these families by explaining that we suspect their child was indecently abused and murdered! The doctor can do no more harm, so I think it better that this case is closed.'

All at once, there was knocking coming from everywhere: the walls, furniture, windows and floor. An invisible angry mob had stormed the room and their protest was deafening. The twin doors to the sitting room burst open wide and I stood motionless in the hall. The hammering stopped dead.

'You tell them!' I demanded of the constable, storming into the room to argue against his decision. 'You tell those lords and ladies that they abandoned their problem children to an existence of torment!' I was bordering on the hysterical. I couldn't control the angry words spouting

from my mouth. ‘You tell them how their children were raped and murdered by that disgusting pervert! Their deaths were never questioned, only welcomed by all involved.’

My father didn’t care what I’d been through; he wasn’t going to tolerate such vulgar talk from his daughter. ‘That’s quite enough!’ He grabbed my shoulder, only to receive an electric shock upon contact, which cast him clear across the room.

‘What the...?’ Constable Forester backed away from me as I turned my wrathful gaze back to him.

‘Miss Granville, you are being used,’ Lady Cavandish intervened. ‘Serving as a psychic channel can be most beneficial to others, but it is hardly a worthwhile practice if the service proves to be to your own detriment. You have done all you can for these children—’

‘No, the truth will be buried!’ I protested.

‘If the constable does not see fit to investigate, then you and I shall write an article to every major publication in the country, advising them of the whole affair.’ The countess glanced at the constable to note whether he was concerned at the threat. ‘But I shall only assist these children if they first agree to vacate your presence and leave you in peace. They may pester me, if they so wish,’ she concluded with a smile, which I eventually returned.

Waves of energy began to disperse from my body, one for every child, and these could only have been seen by the naked eye as wee bursts of air that left my hair and clothes billowing. As the last of the entities departed my form I felt substantially weakened. My knees went from beneath me and I collapsed to the floor.

Lord Cavandish, having assisted my father back to his feet, quickly came forward to scoop my body up and place it on the lounge. I hadn’t blacked out, but I allowed my eyelids to droop so that the adults would not think me conscious enough to overhear their discussion.

‘So,’ Lady Cavandish queried Forester, ‘what are your intentions, constable? Are you going to pursue this matter, or shall I?’

‘Perhaps suicide was a rather hasty diagnosis, judging from what I have just witnessed,’ Forester retorted. Lord Cavandish did not take kindly to the constable’s inference.

‘Are you implying that this extraordinary young woman was responsible for Dr Rosen’s death?’ The lord approached the constable to obtain an answer.

‘All things considered, I must concede the possibility,’ Forester affirmed.

‘If you choose to take that route, when the road to justice is so clearly laid out before you, then I assure you that I shall take this matter straight to His Majesty, the King! So, you had best make sure that you have your facts in order.’

The constable found it hard to keep the grin from his face, for King George IV was notorious for shirking his royal duty in favour of drink and women, and was immensely unpopular in the House of Lords. ‘I feel sure His Royal Highness would not concern himself with such an obscure matter as this.’ The constable let the lord know he was not to be bullied.

‘Think again,’ Lord Cavandish snapped. ‘There is nothing His Majesty abhors more than injustice and bloodshed! And I can assure you, Constable Forester, that His Highness will not take kindly to learning that an investigation into the horrid deaths of so many innocents has been neglected in favour of the persecution of yet another innocent!’

‘There is a very simple way to resolve whether or not this investigation is worth pursuing.’ Countess Cavandish stepped in to avert the unpleasantness. ‘Have you spoken with the other children at the asylum who were in Dr Rosen’s care?’

‘Those children are in an asylum for a reason,’ the constable pointed out. ‘Their testimonies are hardly permissible.’

‘You already know the simple truth of the matter and still you would ignore it.’

‘There is nothing simple about the truth of this matter.’ The constable was determined to get his own way. ‘The only chance I see to ensure that the Honourable Miss Granville is not implicated in the murder of Dr Rosen is if this case remains *closed*.’

‘Agreed.’ My father was fed up with the entire affair. What other people chose to do with their offspring was entirely their business and not his burden to bear. ‘I thank you for taking the time to deliver your findings to this house, Constable Forester.’

The constable nodded to confirm they had an understanding. ‘I shall see myself out. Good day.’

LESSON 3

FRIENDSHIP

‘Oh, my god! This is so tragic.’ Susan sat on my bed, her attention absorbed in one of my old diaries. ‘So the whole ugly affair was just forgotten?’

‘Correct,’ I replied, not looking up from my study of an old Latin text on nature spirits and fairy lore. I was hoping to gain some insight into how to make contact with the elemental kingdoms of nature, an area of psychic study that was grossly lacking in documentation.

This was an area that Lady Charlotte had never researched in depth, so she could not advise me. She claimed this was a practice for the highly adept, as the elements of nature were not easily befriended and were renowned mischief-makers if not properly handled. They also detested most adult human beings for their destruction of nature, their bad habits and their erratic emotions.

Lady Charlotte suggested I might fare better with my investigations. She was rather fond of wine and red meat and she thought this was why she had never been able to attract any of the spirits of nature. I preferred tea, or just boiled water; I ate red meat on rare occasions, such as when the fish were not biting.

Susan had been quiet while she pondered what she read, then said, ‘Well, if this incident changed Lord Granville’s mind about Great Aunt Charlotte being your tutor, then some good came of it. I cannot imagine how bored I would have been these past ten years had I not had you to share my education.’

I broke from my reading to smile at Susan. She was my best, and only, friend of my own age and I completely shared her sentiment.

‘Still, those poor little souls.’ The knowledge weighed on her heart which was one of the sincerest and kindest I had ever known. ‘Is there no justice in this world?’

‘Some,’ I assured. ‘Lady Charlotte held a séance and assisted those lost souls to leave their tormented existence on this earthly plane and cross

over into the celestial world where they could finally find peace.'

'So was it the electric shock that changed Lord Granville's mind about your education with my Great Aunt?' Susan was a girl with a lust for detail.

I nodded. 'The thought of having to deal with my psychic outbursts on a regular basis was just too much for papa to cope with. He was petrified that I would ruin his career and reputation. And Lady Charlotte pointed out that an untrained psychic was an open channel that allowed anything to pour through, so I would be far more troublesome in a state of ignorance than if I was trained to control my abilities. Father relented and accepted Lord Cavandish's gift.'

Before we'd even met I had secured Susan's undying devotion for saving her life and the lives of her entire family. And, although I felt that this debt had been repaid when Lord Cavandish had saved me from the asylum, the Cavandishs' gratitude to me had never waned.

Susan closed the diary and gave a great sigh. 'I wish I had some of your talent.'

'No, you don't,' I insisted. 'Clairvoyance generally leads one into dark and scary places, Susan, and you can't even bear walking to the kitchen in the dark!' I laughed as she gasped at the insult.

'That's not true.' Susan sat upright to protest. 'It's the rats that bother me, not the dark.'

She was so easy to bait. I smiled at her. 'There are far scarier beasts in the world than rats.'

'So it would seem.' Susan placed the diary aside, as Nanny Beat knocked and entered.

'Her ladyship would like to see you both in her drawing room,' she announced.

'Thank you, Nanny,' we both said and she withdrew.

It was unusual to be summoned at this time in the evening. Susan and I were usually at leisure, and as the Dowager Countess Cavandish was not getting any younger, she retired early most nights.

Susan looked at me, an air of excitement in her expression. 'Maybe this is it.'

The 'it' Susan referred to was the season's social calendar—or, more to the point, having a social calendar. Susan had just turned seventeen, and my eighteenth was fast approaching. I had convinced my tutor and my

parents to delay my social ‘coming out’ for a year until Susan had come of age and we could face the marriage market together.

The marriage market was a round of balls, dances, dinner parties, breakfasts and similar festive affairs, during which a young woman was presented to society for the sole purpose of catching herself an eligible young man to marry. Personally, I was disgusted by the whole idea. I had no desire to join this marketplace. I liked my girlish clothes, being ignored by adults and being too young to be expected to attend social affairs. All that was about to change, and after years of being able to be honest and forthright about my opinions and theories, it would be back to playing social games and biting my tongue.

‘Aren’t you excited?’ Susan interlocked her arm with mine and gave it a squeeze as we proceeded to Lady Charlotte’s withdrawing room. ‘Finally, we can show cleavage!’

‘Actually,’ I confessed, ‘I’d much prefer a nun’s habit and a convent, if it didn’t mean dedicating my life to the ridiculous doctrines of the church.’

‘Shh,’ Susan giggled, vigilantly trying to keep my loose tongue out of trouble. ‘This will be far more fun if you leave the church out of it.’

My worst fears were realised when Lady Charlotte informed me she had received a letter from my father, requesting that I join him at our London residence in St James after the Easter holiday season.

Lord Granville, having no male heir, was eager to see me wed. He hoped that I might produce a grandson to whom he could bequeath his peerage, rather than see it pass to whoever I decided to marry. I was the last living relative of my father’s line and he resented that the Granville name would no longer be attached to his estates once he died—whether I produced a male heir or not. Still, my inheritance did make me an attractive candidate for marriage and my father would most likely be indebted to anyone who took me off his hands and would warmly welcome them into the family.

Susan would also be travelling to London to stay at the Earl of Derby’s house on Mayfair, opposite Hyde Park. We were not at all excited by the prospect of being separated, having lived in each other’s pockets for ten years, though Susan was too excited by the event of entering society to allow our imminent separation to dampen her mood. She swore that we

would visit each other every day, attend all the same grand social occasions and, of course, go shopping. I was not an enthusiastic shopper, but I did delight in witnessing the enjoyment Susan derived from the exercise. She was far more aware of the latest fashions than I, and if it were not for my dear friend's good taste, I would have dressed in the fashions of the previous decade.

'To mark the grand occasion of your coming out into society,' Lady Charlotte added, 'my dear nephew, the Earl of Derby, has kindly invited us all to his estate in the Midlands, where he intends to hold balls, dances and dinner parties in your honour. This will give you both an opportunity to exercise your social skills in the ease of the country before your introduction to London society and court.'

'How exciting, Ashlee.' Susan gripped my hand tight. 'Only one more month of isolation! And there's so much preparation to be done.'

So much indeed, I thought. I only had a month to access the extensive library here at the earl's manor in Dumfries.

The library was the reason this manor had been chosen as the best place for Susan's education, and hence my own. Lady Charlotte had also shipped over her collection of rare esoteric books from her residence in Paris. The lady had collected this treasury of works during her time on the Continent and as many were banned here in England, they were priceless to me. I would mourn Scotland terribly.

Lady Charlotte excused Susan and asked me to stay and speak with her a moment.

'I'm going to start working on some sketches for the dressmakers!' Susan fancied herself as a fashion designer, and she had been closely following the adult fashions for some years now, so I felt sure I could rely on her good taste to make me look the part when the big event arrived. 'I have everything in hand,' she said as she kissed me goodnight, curtsied to Lady Charlotte and withdrew to her room.

'I realise this news is not as thrilling for you as it is for my dear Susan.' Lady Charlotte reached for her wine glass. 'And that the social adjustment will not be as effortless.' Her pale blue eyes turned back to me. 'Yet you have exceeded my expectations as a student, Miss Granville. Your aptitude for languages and all academic endeavours would rival any daughter of royal blood. Your grasp of the social graces will, and *must*,

conceal your additional talents, just as I promised your father ten years ago.'

'I would never disgrace you, Lady Charlotte, or the good name of the Cavandish family, who have been so generous to me,' I assured her. It was a great honour for me to be on such intimate terms with the Dowager Countess Cavandish, for she insisted that in private I should use her name. 'I know what is expected of me. I shall do my utmost to uphold your standards and excellent tuition.'

She smiled a knowing smile that conveyed her great affection for me. 'I know you shall, child. I hold no fear on that account. I would not even raise this issue with you if I did not know from my own experience how difficult and frustrating such concealment can be. You will become aware of injustice that you cannot correct without exposure to ridicule and ruin; souls you cannot aid without risk to your reputation; beings and entities you must ignore to save ending up in an asylum for the rest of your days. More than most women, your knowledge will be a prison to you, I fear.'

The lady's eyes had drifted to the fireplace, and there seemed a great sadness in her countenance, or was it empathy for the trying times I had ahead of me? 'Perhaps I shall one day have the good fortune to be an independently wealthy widow, like you, Lady Charlotte.'

The countess responded to my suggestion with a slight laugh, which caught in her throat and caused her to cough. She steadied herself. 'My greatest wish for you, my dear, is that you find a kindred spirit to take for a husband and have a deep and lasting love for the rest of your days. For I was not relieved to be widowed, nor shall I ever regret my choice of husband.'

'Forgive my presumption. I meant no disrespect—'

'I know you did not.' She held up a hand to silence my apology. 'You have the great advantage to be capable of discerning a good soul at a glance. I pray that you use your gift to secure yourself the greatest happiness.'

'And so I shall, Lady Charlotte.' I smiled warmly to make light of her fears.

At this point the countess was seized by a coughing fit, and I was given my leave of her.

My mind was still mourning my impending departure from Neith Manor as I entered my room, which was dark except for the fire that was keeping the cold at bay. The news of my society debut had caused me to lose my enthusiasm for further study this evening. There seemed little point in lighting a candle, as they were expensive and not to be wasted.

I found myself pondering my mother's death from consumption many years before and I feared that Lady Charlotte would soon be taken from me in the same manner.

My mother had been very close to death by the time I had made the journey from Scotland to be at her side, but in her delirious state she had told me something that I had long forgotten.

'Through me you have inherited the royal blood of the Scots,' she had said. 'Never forget that, Ashlee.' To understand why this fact should be foremost in her mind at this vital moment, I held her hand in an attempt to read the thoughts that her condition prevented her from conveying. But her illness and the subsequent pain prevented me from making any sense of her intent without injury to my own physical health in the process.

It surprised me that my father had not taken himself another wife since mama's death; a young woman might give him a male heir to carry the Granville name. Perhaps he was fearful of rearing another child with my extraordinary talents? A male child would be far more difficult to control, or be rid of.

At this point in time, however, I felt that my bloodline could explain my love of the landscape here in Dumfries, which nearly rivalled my attachment to the library.

'Perhaps I shall catch myself one of Scotland's country lords,' I mused, trying to cheer myself up. 'Then I could spend the rest of my days in a place such as this and ignore society and its graces.'

But I knew very well that no man of breeding with high social standing would remain in the country all year round. Only late autumn and winter, through to early spring, gave such solace—provided one wasn't taking up invitations to stay with other people of prominence at *their* country estates!

I wanted to cry, but crying would not change the inevitable.

In the following weeks, I spent much of my time in the library—when I was not practising dance and being drilled on social etiquette. My hunt for every

scrap of information relating to nature spirits often kept me up until the wee hours, and it was only the strain of reading by candlelight that would force me to give in and go to bed. Lady Charlotte was gracious enough not to insist that I get my beauty sleep, for she knew how dearly I would miss the library and how the late hours afforded me uninterrupted time to study.

As the day of our leaving for the Midlands drew close, I began to fear that I would never find the information that was eluding me.

Two days before we were to depart Dumfries I happened across a book entitled *Aradia—the Gospel of Witches*, an Italian text which referred to the ‘la vecchia religione’—the old religion. Although prominent in northern Italy today, its origins dated back to the time of the Roman Empire, or perhaps even further back to the Etruscan era.

Apart from its references to the Etruscan gods and their mythology, of which Diana is the goddess, and her daughter Aradia (or Herodius) the Messiah, it also contained invocations to the likes of Bacchus, Jupiter, Venus and Mercury. It also explained how to prepare amulets over which spells could be uttered, and amongst these I was most excited to find ‘the charm of the ringstone’.

The text explained that to find a round stone with a hole in it was a special sign of favour from Diana (the Great Mother of creation). The lower orders of her otherworldly dominions could then, by invocation, be urged to attach themselves to the stone and render service to the bearer. There was also a caution attached to the possession of such an amulet—it should never be given away, because the receiver would acquire the good luck attached to it and some disaster would befall the giver.

The spirits of nature will no longer be able to ignore me, I thought, well content with my discovery. I had only to find such a stone as was described and they would be compelled to aid me.

Given my psychic abilities, you might wonder what aid I sought to gain from the spirits of nature?

I wanted protection.

The nature kingdoms were said to have as many sub-races as humanity, if not more, although they were no longer connected to humanity’s evolution. A cataclysmic event in some bygone and ancient era had caused a portion of the human soul group to split apart from humanity’s evolution and develop via an entirely different evolutionary process, on an

entirely different plane of existence. The lower orders of these kingdoms could be broken down into four basic races, according to which of the four elements they served: gnomes were connected to the earth and the accumulation of wealth, power and position; undines were spirits of the water and could be employed to help with matters connected with emotion; salamanders related to fire and could assist with artistic and creative endeavour, for they were the very essence of inspiration; the nature spirits of the air were sylphs, the most highly evolved of all. Sylphs brought with them the gifts of ease of travel and communication, and insight into the higher mysteries.

My experience with Dr Rosen still haunted me, and very soon the safety of the Cavandish family would cease to surround me. Therefore, I took it upon myself to find a means of diverting any calamity that might lie in wait in the future.

I spent a good part of the night copying the lengthy invocation into my latest diary, in both the original Italian dialect, and then translating it into English.

I would not be left to the mercy of the fates, for I was determined to have a hand in shaping my own destiny.

Lady Charlotte's health took a turn for the worse and prevented her from accompanying Susan and myself to Hartsford Park, Lord Cavandish's estate in Derby. I didn't like leaving my mentor at such a time, and despite her brave face I knew she was in much poorer health than she let on. A dark murky shadow encompassed her spirit-body around her chest and heart. I feared that there was a psychological reason for her ailment; that deep down she felt her usefulness in this life would come to a close with our departure from Dumfries. I attempted to tell her how much I would miss her guidance and let her know I would be writing often to obtain the benefit of her wisdom. The countess saw straight through my tactics, I fear, and assured me that she would cherish the time to herself to pursue her own courses of study. I put on a happy face, so as not to stress Susan, and wept on the inside.

Nanny Beat and Susan's personal maidservants were in a second carriage, and both carriages carried the luggage. The journey from Dumfries to Derby took the better part of a week to complete, for we

stopped overnight at various towns along the way, the first stop having been in Northumberland.

The countryside was very lovely to view from the landau carriage Lady Charlotte had given us for the journey. The wild terrain of the north was casting off winter frosts and was beginning to be coloured by the promise of spring.

The excitement produced at the thought of the forthcoming social events made Susan a very unsettled travelling companion, but I managed to calm her nerves with a talent I possessed, Susan being the only other person to know about it.

‘Tell me a story, Ashlee,’ she prompted, ‘to drive away my boredom.’

‘And where shall we go?’ I asked.

‘Let us be mediaeval princesses!’ She clapped her hands excitedly.

I screwed my nose up at the suggestion. ‘The church rule of that era bores me,’ I protested in fun. ‘How about we venture into the world of the learned courtesans of Ancient Rome?’ I appealed to her.

Susan gasped. ‘What a frightful suggestion,’ she giggled, inwardly intrigued by the idea. ‘Do you think we should? After all, they were pagans.’

‘Well, I personally would love to have been adviser and confidante to the likes of Plato or Aristotle,’ I put forward in my defence.

‘Yes, I’m sure you would,’ she scoffed. ‘Still, I prefer tales of the tournaments of brave knights than the spectacle of gladiators.’ Her big blue eyes appealed. *‘Please.’*

‘Oh, very well,’ I caved in. ‘Mediaeval princesses it is.’

I managed to make a tale of courtly love and religious oppression last for the entire journey and, as the story concluded, we were but a half-mile from our destination.

‘Here.’ I handed Susan my handkerchief, as hers was soggy with tears. ‘Your parents will be wondering what on Earth I have been doing to you.’

‘I just can’t stand the thought that you were burned at the stake,’ she blew her nose, ‘and that my prince was too late to prevent it...’tis so sad.’

‘But he did drive the Inquisition out of the kingdom, and you lived happily ever after.’ I tried to console her before we both got into strife.

‘I know,’ she sniffled, ‘but the fact that we named our first child after you really got to me.’ She wiped her tears away, although more followed in

their wake.

‘It was just a story,’ I said, worried that she would be in tears when we arrived at Hartsford Manor.

‘But why can’t you marry and live happily ever after?’ she asked plaintively.

‘Because I would rather burn at the stake,’ I replied in jest, but Susan did not laugh.

‘Don’t say that. Of course you wouldn’t.’ Her expression begged me to retract my words.

‘Well, we can’t all have a happy ending, or there would be no drama in the tale.’

‘Yes, we can.’ Susan knew I wasn’t just talking about the story any more. ‘Say we can, Ashlee,’ she urged, her tears threatening to flood anew.

‘Of course we will.’ I smiled to reassure her. Anything to appease her before our arrival. ‘I promise you that we shall both find the greatest happiness.’

Susan’s smile returned. ‘Yes, of course we will. After all, we are two of the most eligible brides in England.’

I suppressed a sigh, as her point was no exaggeration. ‘Yes, indeed... there shall be no lack of suitors for us.’ I returned my attention to the landscape to hide my dread of the fact.

The sun had penetrated the clouds and shone brightly upon Hartsford Manor as our coach pulled up at the entrance stairs. We were aided from the coach by Lord Cavandish and his son, Lord Simon Cavandish, the Viscount of Neith Manor—the earl’s estate in Dumfries. The earl’s heir would employ this title until he inherited the Cavandish estates and titles in full from his father, when he would, of course, become earl.

‘How wonderful you both appear,’ commented the earl, as we came to stand before him and curtsied.

‘You are too kind, Lord Derby.’ I rose, and then turned and curtsied to his son and heir, who was breaking from an embrace with Susan.

‘Viscount Neith...’tis wonderful to see you again.’

‘Miss Granville.’ He bowed dutifully, then laughed to break the formality of the moment and embraced me as a close relative would.

‘Dearest sister, how I have missed your company and intrigues.’

Thus was the Cavandishs' affection for me; I had always been regarded as part of the family. 'I hear that congratulations are in order for your impending marriage, lord?'

'Yes indeed.' Simon smiled broadly, obviously delighted with the arrangement. 'I can hardly wait for you both to meet Lady Catherine Devere of Berwick. I expect her to be arriving with her two older brothers in the next few days, who are very eligible bachelors themselves. I have taken the liberty of telling them all about my charming sisters.' He winked at us both, whereby Susan giggled.

'I have heard that the Earl of Oxford and his brother are very handsome.' Susan was delighted by the news and I forced a pleasant smile, so as not to appear a bad sport. 'What if we both caught the heart of one of the brothers' Devere, then we really would be sisters!' Susan's imagination immediately went off the deep end.

'My thoughts exactly,' agreed Simon, as he offered me his arm to lead me into the grand manor house. 'Why not keep the entire family fortune in the family, if at all possible?'

As the weather was far more accommodating in Derby than it had been for my last few days in Scotland, I rose early to take a stroll before I took breakfast with the family.

A blustery wind swept across the craggy peaks of the grassy terrain, stinging my nose with its chill, although after ten years in Dumfries I was no stranger to the cold. I delighted in the wild atmosphere, electric with the promise of a storm, as I headed toward one of the numerous streams that flowed through the estate. My eyes were glued to the ground in search of the amulet I needed for my experiment.

The nature spirits of the earth were far fewer in number here than they had been in the rich woods of Dumfries, or in the lovely cared-for gardens of the estate through which I'd passed to reach the wilds. The sylphs of the air, however, were in full force and seemed to be urging my speed toward the babbling brook that hosted a few scattered trees and bushes along its banks.

There were stones aplenty washed up along the watercourse and I searched for some time for my prize, in vain. 'Surely there is one stone the like of which I seek,' I grumbled, close to giving up and returning to the

house. I didn't wish to offend my hosts by being late for the morning meal. What's more, I was hungry and the chilly wind had seeped through my layers of clothes and into my bones.

Just as I'd decided to relinquish the hunt, the turbulent clouds above parted, allowing the sun's rays to fall upon the water and illuminate the rocky bed of the stream. As I admired the fish in the crystal clear water, I spied a round stone that was very dark in the centre. I strained my eyes to make out whether the dark patch was indeed a hole, or just a darker colour in the rock that gave the illusion of a hole.

'There's only one way I shall know,' I decided, as I dispensed with my gloves to unlace and remove my

muddy boots. The water only looked a foot or so deep, so I hoisted up my chemise and frock and gathered them into the firm hold of my left hand to spare them from a drenching.

No sooner had my toes hit the water than they recoiled just as quickly—it was absolutely freezing. 'All in the name of research!' I steadied myself against the shock, and as my feet entered the water it felt as though nature was using them as pincushions. I made for the stone as quickly as my freezing appendages would allow, and upon holding it in my hand I was thrilled to discover I had struck it lucky. 'Oh, thank you, Great Mother!' I said in joy, my eyes raised to the clouds, that had again closed over to conceal the sun. A gust of wind suddenly swept my loosely-tied bonnet from my head and off across the fields. The impulse to grab for my bonnet caused me to lose hold of my skirts, which became soaked to the knees. 'Oh no,' I whined, wading my way back to the edge, whereupon it came to my attention that there was a gentleman on horseback atop a nearby rise, watching my predicament with some amusement.

'Might I be of some assistance?' he asked in a jovial tone.

I was too embarrassed to reply, and as I had not been introduced to the gentleman, it was hardly proper that I respond. I forgot my wayward bonnet and grabbing up my boots and gloves, I raced as fast as I was able back to the house.

I employed the servants' entrance and stairs at the back of the house to avoid being seen by the family in my wretched state.

'Mistress!' Nanny exclaimed in shock as I entered my room with dripping skirts, although I had attempted to wring them out before entering

the house.

‘Look what I found.’ I showed my treasure, which did not impress her greatly. She was far more worried about my muddy attire.

‘Quickly.’ She motioned me closer. ‘Out of those wet things before you catch your death.’ She began to unbutton my frock. ‘Miss Cavandish has been looking for you, as has—’

‘I saw footprints.’ Susan entered and was immediately perturbed by my appearance. ‘Oh, Ashlee, what have you been doing? Oh, never mind.’ She waved away a response and broke into a huge smile. ‘The Earl of Oxford and his party have arrived early and shall be on our doorstep at any moment!’

‘For joy,’ I replied, clearly not as thrilled as she. Now that I had an amulet, I planned to spend the afternoon trying my summons, but I would be expected to stay with the family and entertain their guests.

‘I really do not understand you at times.’ Susan placed both hands on her hips, while I shimmied into clean, dry clothing. ‘Why are you not excited? I realise that only the eldest brother is titled, but the younger, Mr Devere, still receives the mighty sum of ten thousand pounds a year, which is hardly anything to be scoffed at.’

‘Yes, yes.’ I drolly accepted her point. ‘I’ll be down as soon as I am presentable.’

‘And you will be charming,’ Susan stated, making me promise before exiting.

‘Of course,’ I assured her.

‘And you will give me your otherworldly summation of the whole family? I must be sure that Miss Devere will be a good wife to my dear brother.’

‘You may count on a full report.’ Susan clapped her hands, blew me a kiss and urged me to hurry as she departed.

I had missed the grand entrance of the Earl of Oxford and his company. By the time I made it downstairs the steward informed me that the family and their guests were in the drawing room, and that breakfast would be served in the dining room presently.

‘Ah, there you are, Miss Granville.’ Simon came forward as soon as I arrived to lead me into the drawing room and introduce me to his guests.

‘May I present Lord Devere...’ He began with the earl, who was tall, dark, slender and handsome, and from all appearances an appealing fellow. His smile was dazzling, as were his eyes of deep blue.

‘Miss Granville.’ He bowed his head in greeting. ‘It is a great pleasure to finally meet the ladies we have constantly heard our dear friend speak of with such high regard.’

‘The pleasure is all mine, Lord Devere.’ I curtseyed politely.

Next, Simon introduced me to his bride-to-be, who was stunningly fair in comparison to her eldest brother, but the lovely blue eyes and slender, tall form were the same.

‘And last, but by no means least, I present to you Mr Devere.’ Simon led me in the gentleman’s direction.

The man in question had been at the window admiring the view when I entered, but upon closer inspection I realised that this was the gentleman I had shamed myself in front of this morning. I caught my gasp of surprise in my throat and curtseyed to him, praying that he did not expose my earlier indiscretion.

‘A delight it is to meet you, Miss Granville.’ His smile disclosed his knowledge to me only.

Like his sister, Mr Devere was very fair and his hair was combed neatly back from his face, where it sat in tight natural curls at the nape of his neck. His eyes were of a paler shade of blue than his relatives’, but they sparkled just as brightly.

‘Mr Devere rode down on horseback,’ Simon informed me, ‘and has just been telling us how beautiful he found the wilds beyond the manor on approach.’

‘Indeed.’ I tried not to blush as panic rose from my heart into my throat. ‘Hartsford Manor is truly blessed by its breathtaking surrounds.’

‘Yes,’ the fellow agreed, ‘breathtaking is just the word to describe the scenery, despite the chill I detected in the air this morning. Still, I trust that with the spring the atmosphere will be far more accommodating.’

I understood his implication well enough.

‘The hunting is very fine too,’ Simon said, thankfully sparing me from having to respond. ‘Miss Granville is quite a fine shot herself, although she refuses to aim at anything living.’

The gentlemen had a laugh at my expense.

‘It is a woman’s nature to create and not destroy, is it not?’ I piped up in my own defence.

‘Then why learn to shoot at all?’ Lord Devere inquired, curious as to my motive.

‘One never knows when one might be faced with an animal that can shoot back,’ I replied winningly. ‘Better to have some skill with a gun or a bow and arrow than to leave oneself defenceless and in need of saving.’

‘What an extraordinary viewpoint you have, Miss Granville,’ Lord Devere commented.

‘Well,’ Lord Derby intervened on my behalf, ‘I dare say that our Miss Granville is a rather extraordinary lady.’

‘I believe that she is,’ Mr Devere commented, his pleasant smile showing some cheek, as I could see this morning’s encounter playing on his mind.

‘What woman could pride herself on being ordinary?’ I asked.

‘Far too many, unfortunately,’ Mr Devere said with glee, as the steward entered to inform us that breakfast was served. ‘Miss Granville?’ The fair young lord offered me his arm to escort me to the dining room.

As Simon was escorting his bride-to-be, Lord Derby was escorting Lady Cavandish, and Lord Devere had offered Susan his arm, I had little choice but to smile and graciously accept.

After breakfast the men decided upon a little game shooting and although I was invited to join them I declined, seeing this as the perfect opportunity to escape into the gardens and try out my summons. Miss Devere was exhausted from her journey and had gone to her quarters to rest for a while.

‘So...tell me all.’ Susan trailed me through the garden. ‘What did you see? Is Lord Devere not very fine indeed?’

‘Yes. The entire family is very fine,’ I asserted. ‘They are all in fine health and good spirits, and have no ill will to speak of.’

Susan clapped her hands at this. ‘And do you think I made a good first impression on Lord Devere?’

My pace slowed at the question for I did find it rather amusing. ‘I did note that his heart centre had a rather rosy pink glow to it, but...’ I spoke up over her pending excited outburst, ‘as I did not see him before you made his acquaintance, I cannot say for sure if you inspired this excess of goodwill.’

‘Ooooooh,’ she pouted, my answer not quite what she wanted. ‘Do you think that another might have already stolen his heart? Did you pick up on some thought to that effect?’

‘Susan, you know that I have been trained to protect myself from the thoughts of others by Lady Charlotte, lest I go mad in society.’

‘But you can still do it if you want to,’ she suggested gamely. ‘Will you?’

My perturbed look was not the response that Susan had been fishing for.

‘As a very special favour to me.’ She clasped both hands together and used her big blue eyes to try and enlist me to her cause.

‘And what shall you do for me in return?’ I teased, knowing full well I would never hear the end of it until I agreed.

‘What can I do?’ she appealed, keen to strike a deal.

As we had reached the large patch of lawn amid the gardens which I felt to be perfect for my purpose, I halted and turned Susan back to face the house. ‘You can keep watch for me and make sure that I am not interrupted.’

‘Why?’ Susan was immediately intrigued and a little worried. ‘What are you going to do?’

‘Ah, no questions,’ I bargained. ‘Do we have a deal or not?’

‘I suppose.’ Susan was reluctant. ‘Will this take long?’

‘Not long.’ I searched for a stick and moving onto the patch of lawn I carefully drew a large unbroken circle around me.

‘Is this some kind of witchcraft?’ Susan queried, keeping her voice as low as she could; the idea obviously distressed her.

‘You’re supposed to be watching that way.’ I pointed to the house, whereupon Susan gave a heavy sigh and complied with my instructions.

I knelt in the centre of my protected space and pulled out my treasure stone. Focusing my intent upon it, I began to recite in a low tone the incantation that I had memorised.

*Spirit of good omen,
Who art come to aid me,
Believe I have great need of thee.
Spirit of the Red Gnome*

*Come to aid me in my time of need.
I beg of thee, do not abandon me,
But attach now to this stone,
That on my person, I may carry thee.
And so when anything is needed by me,
I can call unto thee, be what it may,
Do not abandon me by night or day.*

And what should be my reward for such service?

Upon raising my eyes from the stone, the presence that met my eyes was not at all what I had expected.

Before me stood a full-grown man, not a ghost or a shade but a lustrous spirit being. He was dressed in the mail of a mediaeval knight and over his armour he wore a white tunic that bore a red cross.

‘Oh my.’ I stood so that I might have some chance of looking the rather tall fellow in the eye.

‘What’s wrong?’ Susan queried, unable to see what I perceived.

‘Nothing, all is well,’ I called back to her. ‘Keep watch.’ Rolling her eyes, Susan turned back to face the house.

There is no need to speak aloud and alarm others. I can hear your thoughts as well as your words. The handsome knight smiled.

In fact, he was very handsome and exotic in appearance. His eyes and straight hair were very dark, and his skin had a Mediterranean glow. Had he been living, I might have found him a man worth pursuing.

But who are you? I asked, truly baffled.

Did you not ask for the assistance of a spirit of the Red Gnome? he replied.

Well, yes...

I am one of the breed that you seek.

But...I thought you’d be... I held my hand lower to the ground to indicate small.

Ah! He seemed to comprehend the misunderstanding. *You were seeking the aid of an earth elemental.*

But I was under the impression that gnomes were—

He shook his head. *The reason guardians, like myself, have become confused with the gnomes of the fairy realm is because we are the guardians*

of the sacred and secret doctrine of Gnosis, in which is found the keys to unlocking the ancestral Otherworld. It is from the term Gnosis that the title of gnome was originally derived. It was only later that my kind were banished to the realm of make-believe and myth, and confused with the nature elementals that concern themselves with the Earth and the protection of her natural treasures. Although the latter do surely exist, I am clearly not one of them. I'm afraid you have been misled by the fables spun throughout the ages...but that is hardly your fault. Indeed, no text of true esoteric worth has been written this side of year 1 AD, and if it has, then it was banned, destroyed or distorted to the ends of those in power.

I felt my mouth dropping open and closed it. My hunger for such knowledge and talk was overwhelming, for it had been suppressed for far too long.

I do apologise for my ignorance, but it seems that in this case my error has been rather fortunate. You mentioned a reward for your service to me. What kind of a reward would you require to teach me the hidden mysteries?

The knight stroked his smooth chin as he contemplated his answer. *All I would require in return for my tuition is your trust, for you must understand that any secret doctrine will go against the grain of everything you have come to believe to be the truth.*

As eager as I was to consent, the false belief to which he referred was ringing in my head—gnomes and fairies are tricksters!

I understand your doubt. He answered my unspoken fear, which was rather embarrassing.

I am sorry, I must seem so ignorant, but—

He held up a hand to halt my apology. *I foresee much travel in your future, he told me, and due to your unusual talents I could lead you places where, by virtue of your inner knowing, you could confirm my claims for yourself. I have never been one for blind faith myself.*

He spoke of my talent for psychometry, the ability to read the memories of objects and people. I had often wondered how this talent might be put to better use than merely learning the history of things, or finding lost items.

Indeed. He could hear my inner thoughts churning over his statements. *In this case you could find the lost truth behind the history of this world and*

overturn every misconception that those in power have made it their priority to suppress.

I had never held much faith in religious teachings, that was true, and not even Lady Charlotte had been able to bring much enlightenment to the mystery of human origins. I thought about his offer, but what scholar, psychic or no, in their right mind, could resist it?

Or, I could tell you how to rephrase your summons to call up the kind of entity you were seeking in the first place . . . but in your case I believe I can be of more aid and protection than a toiler of the soil.

I looked at the round stone in my hand as I considered his proposal.

Do you not even wonder at the shape of your amulet? Why it had to be round with a hole in the middle?

He knew the truth, for I did not know.

‘Someone is coming,’ Susan called back to me.

I was out of time, and although I wanted to hear his explanation, if I agreed to his terms I could ask him later. *I find our arrangement most agreeable, friend. I would be honoured to be your pupil.*

The knight smiled, pleased with my commitment. *Then use your stone to summon me forth at your leisure, and the name to which I will answer is Albrey.*

I nodded.

But I would advise you not to bother trying to summon a fairy with the stone, for one of the fey is already attached.

Really? And that entity’s name is?

Ashlee Granville.

Pardon?

He chuckled at my bemusement as he faded from my sight.

‘Ashlee? Did you hear me?’

‘Yes, I heard.’ I was perplexed and annoyed. It seemed that I never had enough time to pursue investigations that were truly interesting and worthy of consideration. ‘I’m done.’ I quickly obscured the circle by brushing the grass with my feet.

‘It is Mr Devere.’ Susan hurried to my side, excited for me. ‘I wonder what he could want with us.’

‘I am sure I don’t know.’ I pretended not to understand her implication that he was interested in me, nor to note the rosy glow of his heart expand

as he drew nearer to us.

‘Ladies.’ He gave a slight bow in greeting.

‘Mr Devere.’ I responded with a small curtsy, as did Susan. ‘Is the game not afoot today?’ I wondered why he was not away shooting with the men, as planned.

‘On the contrary, the game is in fine form,’ he said, his eyes intent upon me. ‘However, there is another caller at the house, and Lord Derby has asked that you join them for tea and introductions.’

‘Then we are much obliged for your consideration in seeking us out.’ Susan linked arms with me to ensure I did not delay, and upon moving off toward the house, my treasure slipped from my hand.

‘Miss Granville, you dropped this.’ Mr Devere was quick to be of assistance, but seeing him hold the enchanted stone out to me, I was horrified.

‘No, you must not give this to me.’ I panicked, and knew I was confusing the issue, but Mr Devere seemed a good fellow. ‘It would bring you bad luck.’

He laughed at my distress. ‘I am not superstitious.’ He insisted that I take the stone from him, but still I would not.

‘Could you not drop it, and I shall retrieve it?’ I suggested. Susan quickly corrected my bad manners.

‘Really, Ashlee, no gentleman could allow what you suggest,’ she whispered in an aside to me.

‘I promise no harm will come of it.’ He pressed the stone into my hand. ‘Any service to you, Miss Granville, is my greatest pleasure.’

Then why could you not have done as I asked? I wondered. ‘I’m much obliged to you, sir.’ After all, I did give him fair warning. Why should I worry if he freely invited misfortune upon himself?

However, the mishap did make me realise that I should find a secure place on my person to store the treasure, so that I could not curse anyone else with my little experiment. The trouble with female attire is that there are no pockets, and to wear the piece on a chain around my neck, rather than the tiny cross I wore at present, under sufferance, would surely mark me as the pagan I was. I decided I would ask Nanny Beat to make a little pouch in which I would place the enchanted stone and then pin it under my attire where it would escape the notice of everyone.

LESSON 4

COURTSHIP

I was expecting an afternoon of polite conversation and boredom, and yet, to my great delight, I could not have been more mistaken.

The older gentleman Lord Cavandish introduced over tea was the Viscount of Herefordshire, Lord Douglas Hamilton, who was a self-taught, self-styled archaeologist. He had travelled through the Near East and beyond in his younger days researching the origins of the sacred doctrines of the church. He was also a theologian who had undertaken extensive investigation into many other religions and beliefs, and had been banned from lecturing at English universities because of his open views. Still, he'd made a fortune lecturing on the Continent and his fame made him something of a celebrity at home. Lord Cavandish was very fond of him, as he had attended many of the viscount's lectures before his services had been politely discontinued by the English system.

'I knew that you would be something of a fascination for Miss Granville, Lord Hereford.' Lord Cavandish gave a chuckle, noting that my gaze had not shifted from the viscount in over fifteen minutes. 'She has long aspired to travel...to pursue an interest in the very same area of your speciality.'

I was spellbound by the tales of France, Italy, Egypt and India. Lord Hereford chose his words for clarity, and the warm velvet character of his voice made listening to him speak an absolute pleasure. The tales of his travels were to me more uplifting than the most stirring adagio, more intriguing than a work of the theatre could ever dare to be, and more tangible and personal than any book I had ever read.

'You have an interest in ancient doctrines, Miss Granville?' the viscount inquired politely.

The viscount was still a handsome man, and I won't say 'for his age', because he was just handsome—period. His greying fair hair only made him appear more dignified. He was trim from a life on the move, and had

skin that had seen too many days in the hot sun. His eyes were pale blue, large and sunken into their sockets, and although weary-looking now, his face had many laugh-lines.

‘A vested interest, you might say,’ I commented, finding myself to be a little more cheeky and vivacious than usual. I had never so wanted to seem mature in my life and not give the appearance of a silly young girl. ‘I was fortunate enough to have had Lord Derby’s library in Dumfries at my disposal for the last ten years, and the Dowager Countess of Derby, Lady Charlotte Cavandish, has collected many fascinating and rare books from her time on the Continent.’

The viscount’s smile conveyed to me a fond recognition of my governess’ name; I rather suspected that she and the viscount would be firm friends as they held similar views. ‘I have studied the Bible closely and found many inconsistencies that I feel need more examination than those of us who are not of the cloth are permitted to undertake. For example, I wonder why the salves mentioned in relation to the embalming of the dead body of our Lord Jesus were all healing salves?’ The viscount seemed to be surprised and delighted by my musings. ‘And when Moses and the Israelites left the Nile Delta, their obvious route to Canaan would have led across the wilderness of the northern Sinai...so why did they push southward into difficult high country to spend time at the mountain now known as Mt Sinai? It certainly wasn’t to get the Ten Commandments because, as far as I can tell, they were taken from a verse in the ancient Egyptian *Book of the Dead*. And besides, it is far more likely that the mountain Moses reportedly visited was the one now known as Mt Serâbit.’

When the viscount looked to Lord Cavandish, shocked, I feared I had gone too far, yet Lord Cavandish responded with a smile and a knowing nod. The visiting lord looked back to me and a grin formed on his face. ‘That was precisely the information I was pursuing in my travels.’

I gasped. I couldn’t help it, it was as if I’d just found God! ‘You are Douglas Hamilton! Who wrote the treatise on the mistaken location of Mt Sinai?’ My grin broadened as the viscount nodded, a blush of pride upon his face. ‘Of course, the Dowager Countess of Derby bought a copy when on the Continent.’

‘I am amazed that a copy made it to England,’ chuckled the old scholar. ‘I never thought to be read at home.’

‘This is hardly suitable conversation to be having in the presence of impressionable young women.’ Lord Devere spoke up on behalf of his sister Catherine and Lady Susan, neither of whom showed any dismay at my questioning, although Lord Devere did himself seem rattled. Susan had heard plenty of the same from me in the past, but she suppressed a grin and tried to seem grateful for the intervention of her new love interest.

‘I do apologise, Lord Devere,’ Lord Hamilton replied, ‘but as your family motto is “No truth higher than the truth”, I rather expected your kin would be more open-minded.’

I was forced to suck in my cheeks to refrain from laughter, and I bowed my head and coughed into my napkin to disguise my amusement.

‘Perhaps a stroll in the garden, ladies.’ Lord Devere offered his sister and Susan an arm.

Oh yes, the young earl admired my good friend. I didn’t need to read his thoughts to know that he was falling in love with her. The rosy pink glow of his heart had almost penetrated the confines of his body and once his heart’s energy mingled with hers, it would be all over. I was pleased to note that Susan was being cautious with her affections; Lord Devere was much keener than she was at this stage of the game and that information would certainly please Susan when she came for her report later today.

Lord Neith was easily persuaded into taking a stroll with his wife-to-be. ‘Will you join us, Earnest?’ Lady Catherine asked her younger brother, who had been standing by the window admiring the view.

‘I am rather interested in the conversation,’ he said lightheartedly, and moved to join those of us seated on the lounges by the low-burning fire.

For a moment I thought I might have underestimated Mr Devere, but then the realisation hit me. *Of course he’d take my side.* He was after my inheritance and wealth, despite his large yearly allowance. As a second son he would not inherit. He would have to buy land or be granted an estate and title by the king—or better, and easier still, he could marry into a peerage.

I immediately turned my attention back to the viscount. ‘Did you travel to the Sinai?’

‘That I did. And I made many interesting discoveries there,’ he added, to heighten the intrigue. ‘I hope to discuss the subject with you in greater detail, Miss Granville, but as I have yet to settle my staff into our lodgings in town, I really should press on.’

‘Oh no...’ I protested, looking desperately at Lord Cavandish, who held a finger to his smiling lips to quiet my distress.

‘Would you not consider gracing my house with your presence, Lord Hereford? I know you are here to visit with your ailing sister and that Hartsford Manor is further afield from her bedside, but the town is only a short carriage ride from here. I feel sure that your stay in Derbyshire would be far more comfortably spent under my roof.’

The old scholar was honoured by the hospitality of his one-time student. ‘So generous an offer could hardly be declined, my good Derby. I would be delighted to be your guest.’

‘Very well,’ Lord Derby said. ‘I shall have my staff see to it.’ He motioned to the steward by the door, who withdrew at once to make the arrangements.

‘However,’ the viscount added, ‘for the moment, I must drag myself away from this stimulating company.’

I think I must have blushed when the distinguished lord looked my way.

‘I am still eager to see my sister and, with hope, I shall find her in good health and will return before dinner.’ Lord Hamilton rose, as did we all.

‘Would it be possible,’ I addressed Lord Cavandish, ‘and if I would not be a nuisance to Lord Hereford, for me to accompany him into town? I am in need of some stationery,’ I added as an afterthought, hoping my want of his conversation would not seem completely obvious.

‘I am also in such need,’ Mr Devere advised Lord Derby, ‘and I could save my weary horse another labour this day.’

‘Of course, my *dear* children,’ said Lord Hereford warmly, and my heart sank at his use of the term ‘children’. ‘I’d be glad to be of service to my gracious host’s guests and to have your company.’

It seemed Mr Devere was intent on becoming my shadow—everywhere I’d turned today he was there. I did hope this was not a sign for the weeks ahead, as his presence was very counter-productive to my goals. Not that I was entirely sure what my goals were—all I wanted at this moment was to get Lord Hamilton alone and pursue our conversation. Clearly, Mr Devere was not going to make it easy for my wish to become

reality.

Susan entered my room that evening and I barely recognised her!

Her soft blue gown enhanced her baby blue eyes perfectly. When she wore dark clothes, or white—as we’d been forced to as children—her eyes appeared to have a steely blue shade, but this evening Susan’s eyes sparkled like gemstones. Unlike me, Susan had been blessed with dead straight hair of deepest brown, which shone like silk under light. It framed her face and was rolled under her ears and wound into a bun at the back of her head. Her hair was laced with diamonds and sapphires that matched her tiara. A hint of makeup made her appear older, as did the low-cut neckline of her dress. Her gown, like mine, was long-sleeved, and in accordance with the latest fashion was completed with short white silken gloves.

‘Oh, my lord, I barely recognise you,’ Susan said, before I could speak. ‘You are just beautiful, Ashlee!’ She swung me around to face the mirror.

I had to admit that I barely recognised myself either. The unruly wave of my chestnut hair did not lend itself to the latest hairstyles as Susan’s did, so the front of my hair sat in tight ringlets around my face, and the rest was rolled into a bun at the back. I did have hair jewels that I’d never had the opportunity to wear, but I had passed them over in favour of some spring flowers. I fancied myself as being rather like a wood nymph. The pinky beige of my dress, trimmed with deep brown, lent itself to my little fantasy, and as my eyes were hazel-green the colours suited me well enough.

Something in deep green would have been my first choice, but Nanny was terribly suspicious of anything green, be it fabric, paper or paint. Her father had worked in fabrics and had warned that copper arsenate, an arsenic-copper mix, was used to produce green shades in the silk substitute fabric, tarlatane. Nanny’s father had observed that a terrible illness, and in most cases death, came to those who had had contact with the green fabric or its dyes and tints. Medical science had yet to publish an investigation into the proposed connection but, for the layman, green was fast becoming a taboo colour to work with, or to decorate *anything* with—copper arsenate was also used to produce green in paint, wallpaper and flypaper.

‘But do I look older?’ That was my main concern.

‘Infinitely,’ Susan reassured me. ‘So...how did your little outing go?’ She suspected my need of maturity had been triggered this afternoon, as god knew I’d never wished for it before this day.

‘I think I’m in love,’ I replied whimsically.

‘I knew it!’ Susan was thrilled and I along with her. ‘We will be sisters.’

‘You mistake my meaning.’ My excitement was dulled only slightly. ‘It is not Mr Devere who has captured my heart, but Lord Hereford. He’s a widower, you know?’ I winked at her to lighten her mood.

Susan’s jaw dropped. ‘But he’s old enough to be your grandfather!’

‘I don’t see his age,’ I protested. ‘The attraction is his wisdom, his knowledge, his experience!’

Susan stood there, clearly beyond speech as she considered the best response. ‘He would make you a countess, I guess.’ She smiled warmly in encouragement, and took hold of both my hands. ‘So, even if we can’t be sisters, we’ll both be a countess.’ She swung me around and then abruptly came to a standstill. ‘Will we? Both be a countess?’ Susan subtly raised our little agreement of this morning.

‘What do you think?’ I teased her, looking into the mirror to fiddle with my curls.

‘I think that you had better honour our agreement,’ Susan stated, hands on hips and clearly annoyed by my stalling.

‘You’re the one.’ I smiled confidently.

Susan gasped, and then squealed into her cupped hands. ‘And you are absolutely sure about that?’

I served her an injured look. ‘Am I ever wrong?’

‘Oh my.’ She drew in a deep breath to contain her excitement. ‘By the time I am presented at court, I might already be engaged!’

Every young noblewoman’s dream, as only the most eligible and beautiful young women managed to escape the marriage market. ‘Highly likely,’ I commented, nonchalant.

Susan giggled, as my indifference made it all the surer. ‘I am so happy!’ She clasped her hands to her heart and twirled around in her evening dress, like some princess from a mediaeval romance novel—or a character from one of my stories.

‘You and me both,’ I confirmed with a kiss to her cheek, and, due to the clash of makeup, we spent the next quarter of an hour in front of the mirror.

My first official social engagement could not have been more memorable.

There was the minor inconvenience of having Mr Devere seated on my right, but to the best of my recollection he happily exchanged words with Lady Vanessa Cavandish for most of the evening. To my left was Lord Hamilton, by whose conversation I remained transfixed for the four courses of the meal. I was transported to the discovery of a temple complex at Serâbit el-Khâdim, which dated back to four thousand years before Christ. Lord Hereford theorised that this complex, if excavated, could prove to be the location of Moses’ mount from the Bible.

I was captivated as I listened to Lord Hamilton relate how he and his associates fought to create interest in the project and raise funds for the huge excavation. At every turn the doors of the Establishment, which were closely watched by church interests, had been slammed in their faces. Lord Hamilton sank twenty years of his life into the excavation, and as much money as he was permitted by the claim of primogeniture on his family fortune.

He was aware that he had hardly made a dent in what he suspected was a huge complex. The only reason he was not still there was due to the local authorities deciding to withdraw their permission for foreigners to excavate the site—just as they’d uncovered a chamber door that threatened to lead somewhere interesting. Douglas Hamilton had been locked out of the Holy Land and had not been permitted to return there since.

The viscount retired early, as he’d had a full day of activity. He cursed his age and bade me goodnight. He was growing fond of me, as traces of a rosy pink glow were penetrating a large black cloud encasing his heart centre, which I had been trying to ignore. My understanding was that Lord Hamilton’s heart died along with his wife, and as he had no children to love and no career or project, his heart centre had shut down for want of use. I feared that his physical heart might soon follow suit.

I retired shortly after Lord Hamilton to gaze upon the fire in my room and allow my thoughts to further dwell upon him. As I sat there, trying to imagine that the heat of the fire was a desert sun beating against my face,

my hand had come to rest upon the stone shoved between my breast and my corset for safekeeping.

I was so preoccupied with my current mood that I had no desire to call upon my new otherworldly associate this evening. I wanted to retire into sleep and allow visions of ancient and sacred places to fill my dreams.

I leant back in my chair and contemplated ringing for Nanny to assist me to undress, when from the corner of my eye I saw a note slide under my door.

The note was sealed with wax but not stamped, and upon opening the door I realised the messenger must have departed the hallway in haste.

I shut myself inside my room before opening the note which read—*Look out your window.* I crossed the room to the window and, pulling the heavy drapes slightly apart, I spied Mr Devere standing by the gaslight feature in the courtyard, with my missing bonnet in hand. He grinned and waved.

I closed the curtain at once. ‘What must I do to be rid of that man!’ I searched for my shawl. ‘I’ve only known him one day and already I wish we’d never met!’ I resolved that I’d best go fetch my bonnet if I wished to avoid the risk of having to explain to anyone else how it went missing.

The temperature was chilly and I made it clear that I didn’t appreciate being dragged outdoors as I curtsied politely. ‘This is a little inappropriate, don’t you think, Mr Devere?’

‘Well, I have been trying to get you alone all day to return it, Miss Granville,’ he explained, in good humour, ‘but your fascination with Lord Hamilton forced me to this solution.’

‘Could you not have had a maid drop it back to my room?’

‘But that might have led to gossip,’ he suggested with a cheeky smile.

‘Well, I daresay if anyone sees us at present it will generate far more gossip.’ I tried not to be amused by my own comment. ‘So, I bid you good evening—’

‘Don’t go.’ He reached for my wrist to prevent my departure and then immediately let go. ‘Tell me what you were doing with your bare feet in an icycold stream at the break of dawn this morning?’

‘Fishing,’ I responded in jest and gave a laugh.

‘Well, I daresay you caught something.’ The man’s tone turned intimate and goodwill oozed from his being.

‘Yes.’ I pretended not to catch his meaning. ‘A cold, most likely, that is being irritated by this night air.’ This time when I made for indoors he did not make a move to stop me.

‘Funny, you don’t seem the social climbing type, Miss Granville.’

His words stopped me in my tracks. I turned back to face him and wonder at his implication.

‘Would you really choose a title over true love and happiness?’ he posited with an arrogance so familiar that I was offended almost beyond response.

‘You assume a great deal from one day’s acquaintance,’ I replied, boiling with fury inside.

‘I fear that a distant assessment is all the opportunity you shall ever allow me, because I was born a second son.’

My heart sank at his low assessment of my character, but what was more worrying was that I cared what he thought—why? ‘I do not feel it fair that you should judge me by the desires of other women. I have a different set of values, motives and goals from most of my gender, so far as I am aware...except perhaps the Dowager Countess of Derby.’

He nodded his head to grant that my governess had a somewhat doubtful reputation in society. ‘I had the great honour of meeting her once, when I was about twelve years old.’ He seemed more at ease now that we had found a conversation and departed the argument. ‘I stumbled upon her taking solace in a quiet moment, separated from the ball that my parents were hosting. She asked me if I wanted to learn something about myself.’ He nodded and smiled to confirm he had taken her up on the offer, and when he raised his eyebrows, I assumed he’d found her discourse very interesting. ‘I do believe that, in the hour she spoke to me that night, she told me more about myself than I have managed to deduce since.’

His hearty laugh amused me. He was rather different to your average, stuffy, run-of-the-mill nobleman. He actually had me interested. ‘Did she speak to you of your nature, or future events?’ I knew my governess and the courses her insights took.

‘Both.’ He sounded surprised that I had managed to predict the turn of their discussion. ‘I’ve never spoken of it to anyone before, but I feel I must tell *you*, for the Dowager Lady Cavandish predicted many events in my life...and I do believe that she predicted my meeting you, Miss Granville.’

Now that twist in the conversation I had not expected. ‘Why do you think so?’ Damn my curiosity, I had to ask.

Mr Devere suddenly became uncomfortable and he hesitated. ‘I didn’t expect that we’d be having this conversation so soon...perhaps it would be best left for when you have had more time to assess my character. For I am not the money-hungry lord wish-to-be that I fear you take me for. I’d like a little time to prove that to you.’

My mind went blank. I was shocked that one day in society could lead to such complicated emotional situations! What was I going to say to this man, for clearly he did carry feelings for me already. I had been warned, and well knew, that my kin took their courting very seriously...but one day! What if this was what every day would bring? I now realised why women in my position chose to marry so fast—to escape situations like this! ‘Believe me when I say that I would only bring you grief. It is because you are such a fine being, Mr Devere, that I know you shall be far happier, contented and prosperous without me in your life.’

‘Contented and prosperous I’ll grant, for I have been warned that would be the case. But shall I be happier? I do believe you will be proved wrong on that count.’

I could usually sense a lie and he was far too confident to be lying. ‘Well, I cannot comment, as I do not know the details of the confidence to which you refer. Lady Charlotte never disclosed any prediction of our meeting to me.’

‘Did she not?’ He seemed surprised, and became quiet, pondering his next move.

Mr Devere badly wanted to tell me something and I just had to know. I attuned to his mental activity, which was accomplished by raising the intake of cosmic energy into my spirit-body; unfortunately this also tended to drown out whatever conversation or noise was going on in the physical world. If Mr Devere said anything beyond this point I did not hear it.

But she described you so perfectly. You would be like no woman I’d ever met . . . at home in the wilds and with any class of people. You even have the look of a wood nymph about you, just as Lady Cavandish described.

Then I perceived Mr Devere’s memory of his discourse with Lady Charlotte, who appeared to be much the same age as when I had met her.

She was holding both of the lad's hands and saying, 'Like me, she will know things nobody else knows and see beyond all things. For she is of an ancient bloodline of kings, as are you, Master Earnest.'

I smothered a gasp, as Lady Charlotte had not mentioned any such thing to me. I was suddenly fearful that Mr Devere had knowledge of me that I did not have.

'Goodnight, Mr Devere.' I curtsied and departed, ignoring his request for an explanation for my hurried departure.

Blessed Nanny, who read all the confusing events of the day in my expression, aided in removing my attire without asking one question to disturb my quiet contemplation.

What if it wasn't me that Lady Charlotte spoke of in Mr Devere's memory? Maybe he's got entirely the wrong woman! That would indicate there was another woman with my unusual proclivities who was going to enter Mr Devere's life; now I really was clutching at straws. Yet, I do believe that anything is possible—EXCEPT that I might be destined to be Mrs Devere. That was not going to happen. I was not born to socialise; I wanted to be an explorer, like Lord Hamilton, and visit all the wondrous places he'd told me of today.

'Why was I not born a man?' I asked Nanny as she tucked me into bed.

'Because women need more power,' she said, departing with her candle out the door.

'If I'd been born a man I could go to Lord Hamilton's manor and spend time in his company without worry for reputation and rumour. I could travel abroad alone and not have the burden of dragging anyone else along with me...except for Nanny of course, if she'd come.'

I rolled my treasure stone around in my fingers, wishing I'd summoned a genie to it, who would grant me such wishes. 'Perhaps in the East I shall find a genie one day?' I closed my eyes to imagine the mysterious desert location where I might encounter such an entity.

Exotic desert locations had preoccupied my dreams as wished; only, every time I ran into trouble during my explorations, Mr Devere was there to help

me out. Our association had seemed altogether too close for my comfort and I awoke with a deep sense of him clinging to my being.

At first the recollection tickled at the centre of my ribcage and I smiled to greet the new day. Then, when my logic collected all the fragmented symbols of my dreams and put them into perspective—then, I was not so pleased.

‘He is just after your money,’ I lectured as I clambered out of bed to give myself a good talking-to in the mirror of my dresser. ‘He’s just a pretty face who’ll become as boring as the rest, once given an estate and a taste of true power.’

‘He does have a very pretty face though,’ Nanny commented, teasing.

‘I don’t want to be wife to an up-and-coming lord!’ I told myself very firmly in the mirror. ‘I have far more promising plans.’

‘Would her ladyship care to share our future with her dear old Nanny?’ She approached to start dressing me.

‘I would rather marry Lord Hereford and keep him company until death comes for him. I shall be left a Dowager Viscountess-in-mourning, free to take up my husband’s work where he left off.’ This plan was only just dawning on me and it sounded wonderful. ‘You and I would be happy, Lord Hereford would be happy, and papa would be furious, for the family line would die with me.’

‘Why do you want to anger Lord Suffolk so?’ Nanny felt she should speak up for her employer.

‘Simply because Father would be angered if I marry a man of my choosing and not his. Lord Suffolk is no father to me! Lord Derby would be happy for me, because he truly cares about what I think and feel.’

Yes, this was my goal, my destiny! I could hear my father’s voice hollering...

‘No daughter of mine is going to be an archaeologist!’

My father stood in his study at the Granville townhouse in London, holding a letter of proposal in each hand. I’d been dreading this confrontation for weeks now, but I was determined to have my way. After spending much time together in Derbyshire, Lord Hamilton had, with my encouragement, proposed. The viscount had never thought he would marry again and assured me sincerely that he would not impose himself on me, in

a marital sense. He'd chuckled at the thought of what his money-hungry relatives would think of him taking a young wife—and begetting an heir on her who might disinherit the lot of them. Still, the simple fact was that he relished my company and also the idea of having a student to pass his knowledge on to. Marriage seemed the very thing, if we were to both get what we wanted.

Unfortunately, Mr Devere was also convinced that I was destined to marry him; hence, the two proposals in my father's possession.

I had written to Lady Charlotte about the incident of her reading for the young Mr Devere, and she responded thus:

I do have a recollection of reading for one of the Devere boys when I was in Oxfordshire long ago, but in relation to the specifics of that conversation, you know as well as I do that psychics seldom recall prophecy when they come out of trance. Memory, like myth, is unreliable and does not give a factual account of an event, in my experience, as it can be twisted to suit the situation and with a little imagination can become quite distorted over time.

I felt sure this was the case with Mr Devere. I held nothing in common with the man, whereas my connection to Lord Hamilton was ten times more evident to me. He felt like home, and, yes, I suspected I was seeking the father figure I'd always wanted, but I didn't care to understand the hidden workings of my mind. It just felt too right to be the wrong move to make.

'Young Devere is a far more suitable match, and has even agreed to link our name to his in regard to the estate.' Father chuckled, pleased about that. 'My grandson will inherit my estate and my name.'

'If that is all you desire, Father, it might be easier if I just stay single, have an affair and bear a bastard for you.'

'Don't you get vulgar with me, miss.' He let loose his frustration as his energy field filled with stormy clouds.

What infuriated me was that it wasn't my whorish remark that had made him angry; rather, I'd taken the liberty of calling him Father, as only sons were permitted to do.

'Mr Devere is the only suitor to whom I shall consent,' he told me, adamantly.

'I have not needed your consent since I turned twelve,' was my retort. 'Disinherit me, by all means.'

‘You stupid girl.’ Father locked eyes with me. ‘Mark my words...it would be a disaster for you to marry anyone but Mr Devere.’

Naturally I took his advice with a grain of salt. ‘Goodbye, Father. I guess if you want an heir, you’ll have to remarry and raise one yourself.’ I left without further ado.

‘Then have your disaster,’ my father uttered in my wake, ‘but don’t say I didn’t warn you.’

This did not sound like a threat made in anger, I thought, but more like my father knew more than he was prepared to say.

No! I would not allow him to undermine my confidence. This was my life and I would do as I saw fit with it; to hell with the family name and estate. I was to be the Viscountess of Hereford, Lady Hamilton, and I liked the sound of that—it would look quite impressive on a book, I imagined! Clearly, I was no longer welcome in my father’s house, and it was out of the question for me to move my belongings into Lord Hamilton’s townhouse before we wed. Alas, I found myself in front of the Cavandish House on Mayfair—this was one of the most sought-after addresses in London.

‘I didn’t survive one day without you.’ I told them my troubles as I was greeted first by Susan, Lord Cavandish and then the rest of the household.

Thankfully, I was greeted with open arms and, fully appreciating my predicament, they invited me to be their guest until my wedding to Lord Hamilton. I don’t think any of the Cavandish family truly understood our attraction, except for maybe Lord Derby.

Bless that whole family, for not one of them ever tried to dissuade me from my decision. My word was gospel so far as the Cavandish family was concerned and if I thought Hamilton was the right choice, then he was. I felt it a crying shame my father did not have the same respect for my good sense; from what I could tell he did his best to deny I had any sense, psychic or otherwise.

I was taking tea with the family, who were lending their brain power to help sort out my affairs, when the announcement of the arrival of Lord Devere and his relatives sent me into a panic. I rose immediately to retire to my room, saying that I needed to write a letter to Lord Hereford at once.

The family, of course, understood my need for a quick departure, and excused me as requested.

I didn't escape the Devere family's acquaintance completely, but I had managed to make it to the hallway stairs before they were led past me. I hoped I might escape their notice altogether, but Mr Devere, who was trailing the party, spotted me before he entered the sitting room and changed his course. 'Miss Granville,' he called.

'Good day, Mr Devere.' I looked back but continued to slowly ascend. 'I'm sorry I can't stop to talk. I have an urgent letter to write.'

'Is it to me?'

The hopeful and amorous note in his question made my heart ache and I stopped my ascent. 'No,' I replied, as gentle a rejection as could be delivered.

He sighed and took a second to gather his thoughts. 'So, you are determined to marry Lord Hereford?'

'Word travels fast.' I couldn't believe how fast. I took another step forward to escape this conversation.

'No.' Mr Devere shook his head to assert he had heard no rumour. 'I can tell by the way you regard me as an enemy, to be avoided.'

I immediately refrained from braving another step. 'Truly, you deserve better than I could ever give you as a wife. I will never make you happy.'

'You do make me happy!' he retorted, then his voice dropped to a whisper. 'Goddamn it!' He shook his head to collect himself. 'Why should Lord Hereford be more deserving of your affection than I, if it is truly not about the title? What can he grant you that I cannot?'

'In a word, freedom,' I replied, and Mr Devere looked at me dumbfounded. 'We both know he is not a well man. Lord Hereford just wants my company for what time he has left, and in return he will supply me with ample funds to indulge my travel ambitions once he has departed this world.' I paused and as Mr Devere still seemed to be at a loss for words, I added, 'I did tell you my agenda was unique to my gender.'

Having pondered my words a moment, Devere replied, 'You're not a romantic then?'

I smiled at his jest. 'No, romance is for those who do not have the stomach for non-fiction.'

'I like a little of both, myself.' He bowed out of the conversation graciously, and moved to join his family in the next room. 'I wish you all the very best for your future, Miss Granville.'

‘And you, Mr Devere.’

I dashed to my room to gather my sensibilities.

I had my letter personally delivered to Lord Hamilton by Nanny Beat and my betrothed visited me at the Cavandishs’ residence on Mayfair that evening.

There was great cause for celebration in the Cavandish household that night, for Lord Devere had proposed to Susan that very afternoon and Lord and Lady Cavandish had blessed the couple’s plans to marry. Susan was especially excited that her betrothed had suggested that they be married by a special licence granted by the Archbishop of Canterbury. Such a licence cost the huge sum of twenty-eight guineas and was quite often used by the well-to-do. I daresay I had never seen my dear friend more beside herself with excitement, joy and pride, for she was to be a countess, just as her mother before her. Quite apart from the prestige of the affair, Susan was very taken with Lord Oxford, James Devere, and he with her—everyone agreed it was a fine match.

Due to a falling out between Lord Hamilton and the Church of England over his research, a marriage by special licence was not a route the viscount and myself could take. The risk of my father—or Lord Hamilton’s extended family—objecting was too great for a marriage by the banns to be an option either. So it was decided that it would be a civil licence for us. We only needed to be residents of London for fifteen days and a licence would be granted, whereby we would be permitted to marry in a church or a registry. As neither of us was very religious we decided on the latter option.

Five days later I was visiting with Lord Hamilton, whom I had taken to calling Mr Hamilton. Nanny Beat had accompanied me on the visit to avoid gossip and she was quietly doing needlepoint at the other end of the room, whilst Mr Hamilton and I discussed our wedding plans.

Not that there was too much to discuss. As soon as we were married, we planned to do the frightfully unfashionable thing and leave London for the duration of the social season. We would retire to Lord Hereford’s estate in the Midlands, which housed his extensive reference library, and get to work on my further education.

I enjoyed discussing our plans and I thought Lord Hamilton was also, but as I began speaking of our future together, the man's good mood ebbed. His light-body clouded over momentarily and I knew that something was bothering him.

'Why are you so distressed?' I asked. 'Is it the objections to our marriage that your relatives have expressed?'

'Hardly. We both know they have nothing to fear, and if they wish to get all sweaty over the issue then...so be it.' He grinned to hide his worry. 'I am distressed because I have a gift for you.' He reached down behind his comfy chair and handed me two heavy, bound locked books. 'Like you, Miss Granville, these are very precious to me and therefore I want you to have them.'

'Oh, my lord!' I was stunned. They looked intriguing, and had locks on them, yet neither of the books had titles or authors on the cover. 'What amazing texts are these?' I looked the curiosities over as I accepted them from my betrothed.

'What is within is too secret to be named,' he explained. 'Here are the keys.' He held them out to me on a fine piece of deep green ribbon which was tied in a bow to stop the keys escaping.

I placed the books aside and, leaning forward to take the ribbon from him, my lips brushed his cheek fondly. 'Another man might have given me jewels to win my favour...and that is why I love you, Mr Hamilton.'

As Nanny cleared her throat, I took the hint and sat back to investigate my presents further.

'Open them later, my dear, when you are *alone*,' he insisted, rather awkwardly, and I knew there was something underlying the unsettled mood of the viscount this evening.

I smiled. 'You know that I know there is something amiss with you?'

Yes, I had told my intended of my extraordinary abilities and how my father had made me suppress them for fear of me ruining his reputation or embarrassing him. To this Mr Hamilton had replied that he had already ruined his reputation in the House of Lords and that no matter what I did with my life, I would never bring him anything but joy and utter delight. Now you see why I couldn't but adore the man.

'You promised you wouldn't use your hocus-pocus on me.' He defended himself lightheartedly.

‘I don’t have to look past the expression on your face to know that something has upset you...is it me? Are you having second thoughts?’

‘No,’ he stated resolutely. ‘You are not the problem.’

‘Is it my father? Your relatives? Mr Devere?’ I kept trying to guess, while Lord Hamilton shook his head, smiling.

‘All of the above,’ he joked, ‘and none.’ His humour evaporated.

I had promised Mr Hamilton that I wouldn’t violate his mental space, and if I broke that vow now there would be no hope for me during our married life together.

‘Are you ill?’ I became worried, although I noted that his light-body was much healthier than when we’d first met—especially his heart.

Mr Hamilton laughed away that fear. ‘My dear Miss Granville, I haven’t felt this good in twenty years. I just wanted to give you a present, that’s all.’ He sidestepped the whole inquiry. ‘Is there a law against it that I am not aware of?’

‘No,’ I giggled, as he exaggerated his injured pride for my amusement. I wanted to ask why he hadn’t waited until our wedding night to give me his treasured books, but since he’d worked so hard to steer me off the topic I didn’t have the heart to breach it again.

When I returned home that evening and I was alone, as requested, I unlocked the viscount’s gifts.

The silver key unlocked a green volume. Inside was a handwritten text, complete with sketches, of the life’s work of Douglas and Clarissa Hamilton. My eyes immediately filled with tears of gratitude, that he would give me such a personal treasure. On the inside of the thick cover Lord Hereford had written, *To my love incarnate—Douglas*, and today’s date. I was so moved I could barely breathe and as I was only wearing my chemise, it wasn’t a corset restricting me, but my own heart expanding to fill the confines of my chest.

The thick red volume was far more extraordinary. It had a gold lock and key, and inside was no text at all. The pages had been hollowed out, but it appeared to be a book when closed. It did, in fact, contain a small vial of white substance—it was not a liquid, so I assumed it was a very fine powder, like ash.

‘Such a big book for such a little vial?’ I picked the intricately carved crystal container out of its padded red velvet casing, but I dared not open it

until I asked Lord Hereford what it was.

I closed my eyes and focused on the vial to see what history it had to tell me, but apart from a few fleeting glimpses of Lord Hamilton admiring the contents, I saw nothing. It was as if the vessel had been cleansed of all psychic imprints.

I opened my eyes to observe the object once more. Just the exotic design of the vial told me the substance was probably rare or expensive, or both! I placed the vial back in its case and I was closing the cover when I saw that the substance had a slight illumination of its own. My eyes were transfixed by the little glowing bottle for some time. My heart fluttered in my chest with excitement and I was overcome with the kind of warm sentiment that I had only ever felt toward Susan, Lady Charlotte or my dear Nanny Beat: yes, I was falling in love with Mr Hamilton and all his mysterious secrets and knowledge.

This morning I learned that doing the right thing is not always for the best.

I awoke from a lucid dream; Lord Hamilton was dead. I was sure of this, as if it had happened yesterday—only it had not happened yesterday. Mr Hamilton had been in fine health when I'd left him after dinner.

'What is happening?' I felt ill, as if I had one foot in two separate worlds. I was clutching my treasure stone, which I had taken to wearing on a chain around my wrist, where the stone was hidden from the public eye by my gloves.

There was a vision superimposing itself upon my bedroom surroundings. I saw Lord Hamilton slouched in a chair in his study, wine glass still in his fingers and white as a ghost.

I rang the bell for Nanny and slid out of bed into the icy morning, the shock of which dismissed the awful vision and my nausea departed with it.

Nanny entered, still in her bedclothes.

'I have seen something awful, Nanny. I need to see Lord Hereford at once.'

My saving grace nodded and left to prepare.

'Please let me be wrong about this.' I moved to the mirror to make myself presentable. 'If there is a god, then let this be a nightmare and nothing more.'

He can't be dead! I reasoned to myself. I had seen the vitality returning to his spirit-body and his physical body was following suit. Lord Hereford could simply not have died of natural causes. *No, not natural causes.* I saw a hole in my reasoning.

When our carriage arrived at the front of the viscount's residence in London, I was distressed to see much commotion afoot. The front door was open and a policeman stood guard.

I was allowed into the house once I explained my relationship to Mr Hamilton. A Constable Fletcher and Lord Hamilton's cousin, Mr Fredrick Hamilton, met me in the hallway. Mr Hamilton was the heir apparent to the Hereford estate and titles—he appeared both pleased and displeased to see me.

‘What has happened?’ I beseeched, trying to look past them into the study.

‘I regret to inform you that my dear cousin departed this world during the night, Miss Granville.’

I gasped more from knowing than shock. ‘But how?’

‘We'll know more once the doctor has completed his examination.’

The constable motioned me into the sitting room to talk.

‘I want to see him,’ I insisted, knowing that doctors were useless when it came to deducing the cause of death; post mortems were seldom in-depth investigations unless foul play was suspected. If Douglas had been murdered then I wanted to know, and by whom, and why. I couldn't stand to think that someone might have killed him to prevent our union. My eyes turned to Mr Fredrick Hamilton, for he had the most to gain.

‘When the doctor is done, Miss Granville,’ he advised me, whereupon I promptly turned and disobeyed, charging into the study.

The doctor was packing up his things, so I strode toward the desk where Lord Hamilton was slouched, just as in my vision, except for one small detail—the wine glass was gone. I skirted around the desk looking for recent stains and there it was.

‘A fresh wine stain.’ I pressed my clean white gloves into it and captured the deep red stain on my fingers. ‘Was my betrothed drinking when he died?’ I held my fingertips up for the men to see. Mr Hamilton turned pale as the constable looked at him.

‘Why, there was a...’ He appeared too afraid to say it.

‘Yes, man?’ the constable demanded.

‘Wine glass...that had spilled all over the desk, so I had the maid clean it up.’ He appeared to me to be afraid, but not guilty.

‘You never disturb a crime scene!’ The constable was irate and the rebuke made little, plump Mr Hamilton jump.

‘But I assumed he’d had heart failure...you see how he looks.’ Mr Hamilton motioned to the deceased. He wiped the sweat from his brow with the handkerchief in his free hand.

‘I second Mr Hamilton’s diagnosis,’ the doctor added. ‘Lord Hereford has died from apoplexy.’

‘Apoplexy?’ I queried.

‘A stroke, Miss Granville,’ the doctor explained, as if I were ignorant. ‘Lord Hereford was not a young man. Too much exertion or *excitement* means high blood pressure...his ticker couldn’t cope. There is no mystery here.’

‘Boiling foxglove leaves in wine was a preferred poisoning technique in earlier centuries, as it induces fatal heart events in victims,’ I posited, ‘and it leaves no scars on the way down.’

‘How do you know that, Miss Granville?’ The constable was genuinely curious.

‘I read, Constable Fletcher,’ I replied a little dryly. It was not easy to stand there arguing with these idiots, whilst Lord Hamilton was dead beside me. I could no longer deduce information from Lord Hamilton’s light-body, for it had withdrawn with his spirit at the time of his death.

‘Well, if my cousin has died of such a thing, we know who did it,’ Mr Hamilton commented snidely to the doctor.

‘I rather think that if I were going to kill your cousin, Mr Hamilton, I would have done it after the wedding. As it is, I stand to inherit nothing from my betrothed, or my father.’ I could see the statement put me in the clear so far as the constable was concerned, but it also made me realise that I was destitute.

I walked around the desk and placed my hands on Lord Hamilton’s shoulders, hoping to pick up some impression from his remains, but I felt nothing. He had gone to his beloved wife, Clarissa. Perhaps this was how fate would have it whether Lord Hereford’s death proved to be murder or not. Maybe Clarissa was not prepared to share Douglas with another

woman? Still, as I had been left the Hamiltons' combined knowledge in one huge volume, I had achieved my aims, in a way.

'May I have a moment?' I requested, a little of my sadness slipping into my voice.

'I apologise, Miss Granville,' the constable said as the doctor and Mr Hamilton made for the door, thankful for the opportunity to withdraw, 'but if a crime is suspected of being committed here, I can hardly leave you alone at the crime scene.'

'I only wish to pray quietly for a moment,' I explained.

'I'll be quiet,' the constable assured me, taking a seat.

Just because the viscount's spirit had left his body, it didn't mean his spirit had departed the premises. I turned back toward Lord Hamilton and, closing my eyes, I quietly opened myself to his presence. *What happened here, Douglas? Do my perceptions deceive me? Could you have died from natural causes?*

The lighting in the room changed; it was evening now and candles burned brightly in the room. I felt Douglas very close, but before I had spotted him, my attention was diverted to the door of the study as two gentlemen entered.

'Miss Granville is meant for Mr Devere, Hereford,' said one of the stately-looking fellows, dispensing with formality to get straight to the point. 'There is nothing to debate here tonight.'

I looked back to the desk to find my betrothed alive, but his expression gave me the impression that he was not happy to see his callers. 'She does not wish to marry Mr Devere,' Hamilton replied, not sounding surprised by their visit or the nature of it.

'You owe us your allegiance, Hereford, and we have never needed it before today,' retorted the fellow, who had not taken a seat, but stood holding his coat and hat in his hands. Obviously, he did not plan on staying long.

'This is nothing personal, Hereford,' said the other gentleman who was younger than the first. 'We didn't spend all these centuries creating Miss Granville so that you could abscond with her.'

Creating me? Was I hearing this correctly?

'You don't have any claim on her,' Hamilton advised them, sounding most amused by their delusions, 'and good luck holding such a woman

when she doesn't want to be held.'

'She *will* marry Devere. It has been foreseen,' said the larger, more threatening fellow, who was already putting his hat on to take his leave. 'One way or another, Hereford, it will eventuate.'

Who are these men, Douglas? Who are they working for? Mr Devere? I couldn't believe the man would hire killers! Besides, these two had the look of men more highly placed in society than Mr Devere was himself. And from the intimate tone of the conversation, I concluded that Lord Hamilton knew these fellows well. Why the hell was everyone so interested in who I married? *My secret craft*; had word somehow got out about me?

The vision vanished along with all sense of Douglas. That was all I was going to get out of this place today; I was in no fit state for any more channelling at present anyway. 'I'm done,' I told Constable Fletcher, who immediately sprang from his seat to prevent me from departing.

'I'll need to question you further, Miss Granville.'

'Not now.' I flatly rejected the idea. My head was swimming, my stomach was full of panic and my heart was aching for the happy marriage it would never know. 'Perhaps this afternoon?' I became more amiable in the hope of getting my way. I really needed to be alone and thankfully the constable was understanding, as he nodded in agreement.

'If I might just ask...' He begged my indulgence. 'What distracted you from your prayer just now?'

'Pardon?' I must have been in a trance.

'You looked from the doorway to the desk several times,' he said, seeming confused that I didn't recall my actions of only minutes beforehand.

'I was just considering all those who had good cause to kill my betrothed...there were many people who did not want Lord Hereford and myself to wed.'

'So you do believe he was murdered?'

'Most certainly,' I said plainly. 'But now that all the evidence has been cleared away, I daresay you won't have a case for murder, let alone a chance of finding the culprit.'

The constable's light-body dulled a little. He thought I was insulting him, and he was angered that he'd not discovered the oversight himself.

‘No reflection on your skill, constable. Your profession does not have all the resources it should. However, I am sure it will be concluded that Lord Hereford died of apoplexy, due to the excitement of his forthcoming wedding. That’s nice and neat.’

‘Such serious cynicism in a woman your age, Miss Granville?’
Thankfully Constable Fletcher could see my point. ‘It almost sounds as if you are issuing me a dare?’

‘I know how the law works, so there is little point.’ I felt a great bitterness well up inside my throat, and I knew I was taking my anger out on the wrong person. Hence, I promptly curtseyed and left.

LESSON 5

MARRIAGE

Lord Cavandish had vowed that I would never be destitute so long as he lived, and his family was in accord with him. I was very grateful for their generosity and kindness, but I had no intention of imposing on them for one moment longer than it took me to work out what on earth I was going to do.

‘I’m sure Lord Suffolk shan’t disinherit you now.’ Susan had come up to my room to try and cheer me up.

‘I don’t want his money if it means I have to hear him say, “I told you so, you s-silly girl!”’ I stuttered at the thought of my next meeting with my father. I had hoped there wouldn’t be one.

My father was actually my prime suspect in regard to the two men that I’d envisioned threatening Lord Hereford. Lord Granville had higher connections than either Mr Devere or Mr Hamilton—the cousin of the deceased viscount.

‘Well, word has it that Mr Devere would not be averse to courting you again.’ Susan tested the waters on that count.

‘Again?’ I was infuriated. ‘He never courted me in the first instance.’

‘I will leave if you are going to get unpleasant.’ Susan let me know that I was dangerously close to insulting her brother-in-law-to-be. ‘He didn’t court you, because you never granted him the opportunity. I can’t understand what you could possibly have against Mr Devere. He is charming, lively, witty and *handsome*... almost as handsome as my dear Lord Oxford...but you know I am partial to dark-haired men.’ She wafted away on a daydream for a moment.

I took a deep breath, hoping to avoid insult. ‘It doesn’t matter what I think, as it seems everyone else in the world has already decided that I must marry him! *That* is what I have against Mr Devere.’

‘So it is Mr Devere’s fault that he is so well thought of and thus highly commended to you?’ Susan’s skill at argument and her sound reasoning came to the fore.

‘No.’ I hated to concede her point. ‘I just resent not being given a choice in the matter.’

‘Is it fair to suggest that you’re not being given a choice when you haven’t even studied the option?’ Susan broke into a smile, knowing she’d snared me. ‘Have you? I think you fear finding him as agreeable as everyone does.’

‘I don’t feel very well.’ I sat on the bed and then collapsed onto my back.

Susan suspected that I was just trying to escape answering her.

‘I really do need some rest,’ I appealed, at which she gave me a disappointed look, ‘but I promise I will give Mr Devere more thought.’

My vow apparently appeased her as I got a kiss. ‘Rest well, my friend. May your pondering lead you ever onward to a brighter future.’ Susan left and I was finally alone.

I had imagined that I would burst into tears at this point, but I was numbed with shock; fate had triumphed over my will. Why had I not seen this coming? Merely because, in being trained to control and play down my talents they had been stifled. Why had I been given such gifts if I was not meant to use them for whatever purpose necessary? That was not to reflect badly on Lady Charlotte: her training and quiet wisdom had made it possible for me to pursue my full potential without ending up in a mental asylum. She had also made my father a promise, that I would not shame him with my skills, which were now fully under my control—or so I thought.

Speaking of using gifts to their best purpose, I felt my treasure stone bumping against my palm and I sat up. ‘Albray,’ I called, looking about for the knight, who did not materialise. ‘Albray!’ A flutter of panic beset my stomach. Perhaps I had neglected my pact too long and he had given up on me? ‘*Albray?*’

I am here, he advised calmly, as if wondering what on earth was the matter with me.

‘The law of three requests,’ I scolded myself as enlightenment dawned. There were nine metaphysical laws and this was one of them—it had been so long since I had been given cause to consider occult laws, they were slow to come to mind. ‘I am sorry. My metaphysical doctrine is a little rusty.’

Is it any wonder when you dedicate so little time to the study?

He was having a niggle at the fact that I hadn't summoned him since our first meeting, nearly a month before. 'I'm very sorry that I haven't contacted you before now, but my life has been hectic what with all the courting, proposals, wedding arrangements and now funeral arrangements!'

I understand, he granted with a bow of his head. *It was a shame about Douglas. I liked him. He was a good man.*

'What do you know of Douglas Hamilton?' I was shocked by the condolences.

All that you do, he said, and I understood that our bond gave him a psychic attachment to me. *In fact, I tried to warn you with a vision, but the message didn't get through until you awoke.*

'I see.' I took a deep breath. Our connection was a bit disconcerting but by the same token it could prove beneficial. 'What do you think my betrothed died of?'

I agree with you, he stated with certainty. *He was murdered, not by any of the people you suspect, but by someone who indirectly controls the outcomes of all.*

'All of the above and none.' I softly repeated what Lord Hereford had said of the cause of his worry. 'Not the king!' I retorted with my only guess.

No. He smiled, amused by my speculation. *Not the king.*

'Then who? The church?' The church certainly didn't figure greatly in my father's life, nor in Mr Devere's as far as I had been able to ascertain.

Albray shook his head. *More widespread, more secret.*

'A secret society?' My father certainly didn't seem the type, nor any man that I could think of. 'I don't think so.' I tried not to smile at the suggestion. 'Most secret societies perished during the Inquisitions.' I thought that perhaps my knight was a little out of touch with modern society.

Such societies only became secret due to the Inquisitions, he clarified. *If what I suspect is true of Lord Hereford's demise, there is little point in seeking the murderer, as you cannot put a whole society on trial . . . not even if you could find them.*

'Even if I did find the culprit and prove it, chances are nothing would be achieved,' I concluded bitterly, thinking of past experiences. Albray was right; it was useless wasting energy pursuing the case. He knew as well as I

did that I was just avoiding having to think about my future. ‘What are your thoughts on Mr Devere?’

Albray suppressed a chuckle. *I am not here to counsel you on affairs of the heart. I’m here to teach you the greater mysteries...and, believe me, marriage is not one of them.*

I was a little irked by his reluctance to advise me, but I took a different approach. ‘You said, last time we met, that you saw a great deal of travel in my future...I am in the process of pondering the best way to bring that travel into being.’

In that case, you should probably see Mr Devere and hear out his wedding plans.

‘Not you too.’ I was hoping for some dark secret to assure me I should not wed Devere.

Albray just shrugged as if to say—why ask if you already know everything?

‘Will he travel with me?’

Albray smiled at my fickle nature. *What do you see?*

My mind was cast back to the night that I had dreamed about travelling with Mr Devere. The intimacy of that dream, and the fact that he’d kept showing up to save me, made it uncomfortable to dwell on. ‘I see that we may travel a similar path, but take separate routes that sometimes meet.’

My knight shrugged. *There you have it.*

‘But I’ll never be allowed out on my own as a single woman! If I want to travel, I’ll have to wed *somebody*! I don’t want to face the marriage market. But what if those who killed Douglas will kill any man I intend to marry except Mr Devere?’

A poor woman could travel alone.

‘I am a poor woman, so I won’t have to improvise.’ I made light of the suggestion.

It would be precarious for most, but you could protect yourself.

‘How?’

How! He was surprised. *You have more power in your little finger than I ever had in my whole body for the entire duration of my life!*

I did not know how to take the compliment.

Don’t you remember Rosen’s tower chamber?

My vision dulled as I saw an image of a whirling force and then came back to the still calm of my room. 'I had many angry souls there to aid me that day.' I resented the fact that he'd brought the incident up.

In that instance your ability was the weapon and those angry souls wielded you to their own ends. But you can also make the reverse happen, to enhance the powers you already have, he added quickly, as my expression must have reflected how distressing I found the topic.

'I can draw upon the power of otherworldly beings?' I was making sure I had deduced his meaning correctly.

You are a channel! The channel goes both ways. You can draw upon the knowledge and talents of all those otherworldly entities which might be disposed toward your service. So far there's only me, of course, but I'm sure we can widen your acquaintance.

'So what talents do you possess that I could draw upon, for example?' I had totally forgotten all other problems; this was an intriguing conversation.

Swordfighting, Albray suggested. I gasped with delight at the notion. *Find yourself a sword,* he said, to assure me he was quite serious.

I glanced around—no swords obviously, so I grabbed up my mirror by its handle.

Hold it out before you.

I held it out straight, giggling at the very idea of being in a sword fight, when a powerful and pleasing presence passed over me from behind to carry my framework without any aid from me. I lunged forward, sweeping my mirror to and fro, with such force and technique that I could only wonder at my movements.

I didn't hear the knock on the door, but as Susan entered, I whirled to a stop.

'Feeling better?' she queried in a playful fashion.

'Yes!' I gasped as I felt Albray abruptly withdraw from my frame. I was left tottering on my own, flushed and exalted.

'Constable Fletcher is here to see you,' she said.

'Who?' It took me a moment to snap out of my delirium, and I placed the mirror aside. 'I'll be right down.'

The poor constable was not a happy man as he informed me that, 'It has been deduced, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that Lord Hereford died of apoplexy.' His expression and tone were not so resolute as his words. 'I'm very sorry, Miss Granville.'

'No more questions then,' I said, obviously not surprised.

'No more questions,' he reluctantly confirmed, and was accompanied out by the steward.

'I'm so sorry, Ashlee.' Susan held my hand, as she could see I was fit to cry. 'Won't you come to the ball with us this evening—'

I held a finger to her lips. 'I know you only wish to take my mind off my worries, but that is where my mind needs to be right now. I'll be fine at home alone,' I assured her. Actually, 'home alone' sounded extremely nice indeed.

I had dinner in my room, as I planned to begin reading the work of Douglas and Clarissa Hamilton. I was not a paragraph into the text when I felt someone leaning over my shoulder. I was startled to find Albray. 'I thought you'd gone?'

You didn't dismiss me, he explained.

I could feel myself blushing as I recalled being controlled by him. 'You are an excellent swordsman,' I commended, wishing I could control the heat rising through my cheeks.

And that was just a hand mirror, he jested. *Wait until you see what we can do with a real sword.*

Actually, I swear I detected a little awkwardness in his behaviour. I couldn't see it, but I sensed an attraction. 'Would you like me to dismiss you?'

Albray shrugged. *It is a long time since I've been in a woman's bedchamber.* He sat down in the other chair by my reading table, with a large grin on his face. *Perhaps you wish to dismiss me?*

He knew I didn't want to dismiss him. 'I have more questions for you.'

Ahhh...I thought so. He tried not to show disappointment that I was not going to flirt with him. I'd only just discovered the art of flirting and I had to admit I did find it fun. Still, I was not in the mood for play at present.

'What did you mean when you said I was one of the fey?'

Albray laughed. *I was wondering how much longer it would be before you asked. It has to do with your bloodline—*

‘An ancient bloodline of kings?’ I recalled the information I’d obtained from Mr Devere.

He nodded.

‘And Mr Devere is also of this bloodline?’ I posed.

So you’ve been told...I know only as much as you do on that count.

When there came a knock at my door, I rolled my eyes with frustration. Could I not get a moment to pursue my own interests? ‘Yes?’

Nanny entered. ‘Mr Devere is downstairs and hoped it would not be too inconvenient to speak with you.’

‘Who ever calls at this hour?’ I thought it terribly rude and inconsiderate. ‘No, Nanny, not today.’

She hesitated to comply with my wishes, which Nanny rarely did. ‘I believe his tidings are most earnest, Mistress. Won’t you spare a few minutes—’

‘Oh, very well,’ I snapped, annoyed. Every ally I had wanted me to reconcile with Mr Devere; at least if I did, I might find a minute’s peace!

Shall I come? Albray offered, a smile of mischief on his face.

‘Dismissed, dismissed, dismissed!’

Aw, he whined sweetly as he vanished.

‘Mr Devere, you asked to see me?’ I entered the downstairs drawing room, where a fire burned brightly to welcome the family upon their return home. The servants were all in their quarters and the large room was dimly lit and silent.

The gentleman assessed me for a few moments. ‘I was very sorry to hear about Lord Hereford. I wanted to be sure that all fares well with you.’

I nodded and forced a smile. ‘The authorities are saying that I caused him to have a stroke.’ I looked Mr Devere in the eye to capture his reaction.

‘I feel sure that you could do nothing but good for any man’s heart.’ He kept the conversation light but not disrespectful.

‘Really?’ I noted he was flirting with me already. ‘Have you not met my father?’

He smiled, conceding that I had not done Lord Granville’s heart much good lately. ‘I met with him today as a matter of fact.’

My good humour departed rapidly. ‘May I ask why?’

‘To inquire if he still planned to disinherit you.’

I immediately suspected that Mr Devere's motivation was to ensure that if he proposed, I still came with a title and estates.

Mr Devere read my train of thought from my expression. 'I didn't want you being left destitute by this sad turn of events,' he argued.

'Why should that be a concern of yours?' I protested his interference in my private life.

'Because, if you will not consider me as a husband, you might at least come to consider me as a friend,' he replied forthrightly.

'You would be content just to be my friend?' I didn't think so. No title would come from just a friendship.

'No,' he said frankly, 'but I shall thankfully accept any role in your life where you will actually acknowledge my existence.' He almost flinched as he awaited a scathing response.

I could have lashed out and pretended to find insult in his straightforward manner, but the truth was I appreciated his forthrightness. 'I know I have been very unfair on you, Mr Devere, but ever since my coming out, all I have heard from everyone around me is "marry Mr Devere"! I am sure that I could walk out on the street and ask any passer-by, who should I marry? And they would answer—'

'Mr Devere,' he concluded with a smile, completely in sympathy with my reasoning. 'It couldn't perhaps mean that it is the right thing to do?'

'How could it be?' I retorted, 'when you are everything in a husband that would cause me bother.'

'Really?' He chuckled, as if he couldn't imagine what was so unacceptable about him. 'Do tell.'

'Well, to begin with you are a social creature, and I long for a reclusive life of study. You are a gentleman with a lust to be a lord, which will tie you to England, and I have a lust for travel. And finally...you are altogether far too handsome. I would be forever fending off mistresses.'

Mr Devere smiled broadly, acknowledging that I thought him handsome. Now I was flirting with him—how did that happen?

'How is this plan then? We marry, spend our honeymoon with my brother and sister, and your brother and sister, at the Devere chateau in Northern France. Then we could leave them and use my yearly inheritance to do some extensive travel. We could return to England whenever your

father eventually dies and leaves us your estate, at which time we could deal with the lordship situation.'

I was dazed, and I couldn't work out if he was serious or not. I'd never bothered finding out what his intentions were. 'That is a really good plan,' I credited, to see what he'd say.

'You would find those terms acceptable?' Now he was trying to clarify if we were still jesting.

'Would you find those terms acceptable, Mr Devere?' I threw the ball back in his court.

'I cannot possibly imagine a more agreeable arrangement,' he assured me, never fearful to expose his true feelings, and I knew they *were* his true feelings as his light-body was very lovely to behold and free from blemish. 'You see, Miss Granville, although I do not have Lord Hereford's experience with travel, I am very eager to experience travel for myself.'

The stunned smirk on my face must have said it all. 'I feel it is too much to be widowed and then engaged again in the same day.' I explained my reluctance to admit that what he proposed was a dream come true. 'May I have a little time to digest this conversation?'

'Of course.' He seemed satisfied and yet reluctant to leave. 'And tomorrow when you see me, will you be distant once more?'

I had barely noticed that all through our dialogue we had been inching closer to one another—now we were very close indeed. The firelight ignited the look of longing on his face as it neared my own.

Our lips met only briefly but my senses were still racing for hours after the event.

I lay in bed that night with myriad conflicting emotions all fighting for precedence and after being tossed from excitement to grief, to guilt, to pain and back to that kiss, I was so exhausted that I slept.

'Wake up, Ashlee...is it true?' I didn't have to open my eyes to know it was Susan, and she was really excited about something.

I didn't want to wake. I was in a warm place with Mr Devere, and I was coming to his rescue. I was wearing men's clothes and wielding a sword. I had defeated his captors and he was just about to kiss me in appreciation for saving his life.

‘Ashlee!’ The way Susan was shaking me took me back to our childhood. ‘Wake up!’

‘I’m being kissed, go away,’ I mumbled, as Susan was well used to my elaborate dreams.

‘And by whom are you being kissed?’ she asked.

My eyes burst open and I sat bolt upright with a gasp.

‘So it is true,’ she deduced from the look on my face, and she seemed frightfully pleased about it.

‘How fickle does that make me?’ I grabbed my head, as it struggled to catch up with the way my world had spun around completely in one day. ‘How do you know about it?’ I was suddenly horrified that Mr Devere might have let a rumour slip.

‘He hasn’t told anyone anything,’ Susan reassured me. ‘It’s just that when he returned to the ball last night he appeared to be quite a different man than he has been these last few weeks.’

I smiled. ‘Different, how?’

‘He seemed like a man in love, and not a lover scorned.’ Susan giggled as she observed my broad smile. ‘Come to mention it, so do you.’

I shied from the comment and climbed out of bed. ‘This is all a bit sudden.’

‘Well, the wedding is only weeks away, and it would be just as easy to have a triple as a double ceremony.’ Susan was excited although she was trying very hard to repress it and not pressure me. ‘Oh, do come with us to France, Ashlee...we could have such fun and adventures. It would be just like one of your stories!’

‘Yes, it would.’ I smiled at the comparison. ‘But...’

Was it because I had heard it stated that I was destined to marry Mr Devere that I was fighting the event so hard, or was it because I knew this would be a lifetime commitment and no short-term affair?

‘So much has happened. I need time to catch my breath,’ I replied sensibly. ‘I should like to see my first intended buried before I think about taking another.’

‘I’m sorry.’ Susan could not share my grief. She was having the time of her life and was finding it difficult to relate to my feelings. ‘I just want everyone to be as happy as I am which is not really fair of me in your case.’

‘I am happier than I was yesterday.’ I returned to the bed and took hold of her hands. I had no desire to bring her down from heaven. ‘I’ll tell you a little secret about Mr Devere, which you must swear upon my honour you will not divulge.’

Her blue eyes grew wide and she nodded in encouragement. ‘I swear.’ She squeezed my hands tighter.

‘He kissed me.’

‘No!’ She placed both hands to her mouth to smother her shock and delight.

‘Just a little one.’ I held my thumb and first finger almost together. ‘It was ever so innocently delivered, and quite brilliant really.’

Susan had given up on covering her shock. ‘I haven’t even been kissed yet, except on the cheek in public, and that doesn’t really constitute a *kiss*. Where did it happen? In the lower drawing room? Yes, it was a very cosy arrangement when we arrived home. Did you find it so?’

I nodded and dwelt on the moment fondly. ‘He wants to take me travelling.’

‘I know.’

Susan’s reply startled me from my memory. ‘You knew! Why didn’t you tell me?’

‘Mr Devere wanted to tell you himself, but you wouldn’t give him the chance.’

That explained why Susan was always promoting his suit to me. ‘I fear the smart thing to do is just surrender to the will of the universe.’

Everyone seemed to agree it was the wisest thing for me to do.

I do not think that would be the wisest course. Albray had changed his tune when I spoke to him in my room as I ate breakfast.

‘But yesterday you said I should speak with Mr Devere about the travel?’

You asked for the quickest way to guarantee travel was in your future, he pointed out. *This is not the only way, or the best way, if you choose it because you feel it is your only option.*

‘I would be safer travelling *with* a husband,’ I reasoned. ‘He can make all my travel plans with no questions asked.’

And the price of that ticket is your love. Albray spoke frankly. *Are you prepared to wear that cost?*

For a moment I thought my knight was talking sense, but then he added: *If it is only security you seek, I can award you that.*

He was asking me, in no uncertain terms, if I loved Mr Devere? 'He is as pleasing as any young man.' I smiled at Albray who was older than Mr Devere by at least ten years. 'And our marriage would serve to get my father and everyone else off my back so that we might get some serious study done.'

You don't think that being a wife is going to be a distraction to your study?

I was beginning to wish I had never brought Albray into my personal affairs. 'What other choice do I have?'

The red book, he said. I suspect it contains many secrets.

My heart skipped a beat. If Albray was psychically linked with me then he knew about the vial. 'Do you know what it contains?'

It is the key ingredient in the Bread of Life. It is $0 = (+1) + (-1)$.

I was frowning. 'That is a riddle not a sum. When applied to physical matter it's an impossible equation. You can't add a negative one to one and be left with nothing. You'll always have the one.'

Unless? he prompted.

'Unless nothing, it can't be done,' I insisted. He grinned and shook his head as if disappointed by my lack of vision.

The only way to turn something into nothing, in a material sense, is to transmit that something to another dimension and make it disappear completely from the mundane environment.

'A transformation of matter.' I caught his meaning. 'Something like digestion or incineration?'

Albray nodded.

Moments later I had unlocked the red book and held the vial of glowing substance in my hands.

Actually, the substance is affected by heat in a very interesting way. Do you want to see how the Egyptians built the pyramids? Albray piqued my curiosity, and pointed to a footstool. *Place that in front of the fire. We'll pretend that the heat of the fire is the hot Egyptian sun. Take the stopper*

from the vial and run it quickly along the top of the stool, and keep your thumb over the mouth of the vial until you replace the stopper.

‘Does the powder have a bad reaction to air?’ I wondered about the safety precautions as I followed them with care.

Watch, he suggested, as I replaced the stopper and found a few particles stuck to the back of my thumb. The tiny particles floated upwards off my finger. ‘This substance defies gravity.’ My hand seemed to feel lighter, then I saw that the footstool had begun to rise off the floor. ‘Oh, my god.’ I couldn’t believe it. The tiny particles of light floated above the footstool, towing it into the air. ‘And heat accelerates the properties of this substance?’

Indeed. Under extreme heat, this substance sends the particles of anything it is attached to into a highward spin state until they achieve perfect unity and transcend the physical realm . . . when cooled again, they will return the object to its place of origin.

My eyes were fixed on the floating footstool as I plucked a particle from the air and, placing it on my tongue, I closed my eyes.

White sand beneath the sandals on my feet. Hot sun above and large pillars ahead supporting the entrance to a mighty dwelling. Dark, straight hair, darker than Susan’s, swept across my face. This was not prophecy; it was past or future life memory! With that thought, the vision departed.

I placed the precious vial back in its case.

‘Tell me, Albray, how is it you know so much about this substance?’ I put my wonder aside for a moment. I realised I didn’t know anything about my otherworldly ally.

I have escorted that vial to safekeeping before. He became rather mysterious. *It was one of two vials. This one contains the life-body, and the other the life-blood, of gods. Together they are known as Star-Fire...you hold the Star in your hand.*

‘And from where did it originate?’

During the Albigensian Crusade, my oath to the Prieurè de Sion—the branch of the Temple knights to which I belonged—bound me to escort the Star-Fire safely out of France and back to where it belonged. When I last

saw that vial, I was on a mountain in the Holy Land. He seemed to be rather saddened by the fact.

‘Serâbit el-Khâdim.’ I named the place I suspected.

He knew Douglas had told me about the sacred site. Yes.

‘Do you think Mr Hamilton intended for me to return this vial there?’ My breath caught in my chest, as the revelation constricted my heart with excitement.

Yes.

‘And you are here to guide me.’ If there was one thing I knew about the Order of knights to which Albray belonged, it was that they knew the way to the Holy Land better than anyone.

I am a guardian of Star-Fire, its order and its bloodline. He bowed, at my service.

‘But I still don’t see how this vial grants me an alternative passage to the Continent?’ I came back to the question at hand.

You were the one that gave me the answer. Albray referred me back to the vial’s housing. *Such a big case for such a small vial, don’t you think?*

‘A hidden section then?’ My fingers traced the edge of the padded velvet surface in which the vial lay, until I felt a hard section and pushed down, whereupon the tray lifted to expose a compartment. I was amazed to see the contents. ‘Money, in many currencies; jewels; a bottle of insect repellent; a map to the mountain of the Star-Fire’s origin.’

Well, I think that confirms Douglas’ intentions, don’t you?

I looked at Albray, a huge smile on my face. ‘I have a mission.’

Having been something of an adventurer himself, Albray was excited for me. *Yes, you surely do.*

Lord Hamilton’s funeral, wake and will reading were terribly unpleasant affairs. His family resented my presence and if the Cavandishs had not been there to support me, I would not have been able to see it through. The Hamilton family were fearful that Douglas might have already altered his will to accommodate me and when that did not turn out to be correct, they assumed I hadn’t got my hooks into the viscount fast enough. Little did they know he’d already given me his greatest and most secret treasure.

There was a certain freedom in knowing about my private insurance policy. If I did choose to marry Devere, all that was mine would become

his, but as nobody knew about the contents of the red book, it would remain my secret nest egg. I could make it to the Holy Land on my own, and yet I couldn't deny my desire to have a companion to share my journey. Clarissa had shared Douglas' journey; at the end of their adventuring days they were able to sit down, reminisce and pen their discoveries together. Maybe I was a romantic after all.

Albray insisted on leaving the question of marriage entirely up to me. Still, my secret inheritance ensured that I could not be pushed into anything, which I felt certain had been Douglas' intention when he'd given me his gift.

The universe always provides, he had written on the back of the map for my treasure quest; unlike most treasure hunts, mine was to replace a treasure, not to steal it. That dear, sweet old man had known that, with his gift, he was giving me a chance to fulfil all my desires! It was a favour I could never hope to repay. I wished Lord Hamilton all speed to his next soul quest and all the happiness, recognition and fulfilment he so richly deserved when he got there.

Once Lord Hamilton was peacefully resting alongside his good wife, I ceased to wear black, an indication to Mr Devere that we were at liberty to resume our talks.

As soon as word reached the Devere household that I was no longer in mourning, my suitor left a calling card with the Cavandishs steward, along with an invitation to join Mr Devere for an early walk in the park the following day. It was now only one week before our relatives were to wed and set off for France. I was only just coping with the pressure of the big decision I had to make—would I marry this week?

'He's here.' Susan was at the window of the upstairs drawing room, keeping watch. 'And Lord Devere and my dear sister-to-be are with him.'

'Oh, wonderful.' I sat down. 'No pressure, of course.'

'Last time you spoke with Mr Devere you weren't under any pressure...' Susan reminded me about the kiss that had happened with no prompting from anyone.

His lips had not been far from my thoughts since that moment. They were, in fact, the only incentive I had for the meeting this morning—apart, of course, from the small matter of placating my father, which I couldn't decide if I wanted to do in any case. I had discovered via the grapevine that

my father had not yet taken legal steps to disinherit me, so I still had the option of making Mr Devere my lord and baron.

The Devere party were led to the drawing room, and there were greetings all round.

‘Shall we depart?’ Mr Devere turned straight to me once the pleasantries were over and offered me his arm.

‘I am ready.’ I was very pleased to take hold and be led out of there. I had no desire to sit around taking tea, while my mind pondered the discussion we had to have.

‘I must apologise, Miss Granville,’ he said as soon as we’d left the house. ‘I had planned to come alone. However, it seems that no one is prepared to wait to hear the outcome of our meeting one moment longer than they have to.’

This was a subtle way of letting me know that our families expected an outcome by the end of our walk. ‘You would think that they have enough cause for excitement.’

Mr Devere stopped to give me an assessing look. ‘You don’t seem distant.’

I smiled. ‘I do believe you made that impossible at our last meeting, sir.’

He gave a broad smile in return. ‘It does seem that I owe you another apology, for taking such a liberty...but at the time I feared I would not get another opportunity.’

‘I feel one only needs to apologise when one has something to be sorry for.’ I let him off the hook gladly. ‘I know that I was not offended and I am not remorseful, Mr Devere. Are you?’

‘No, but I have found my forthright manner can be too much for some to tolerate.’

‘That is what I like most about you,’ I assured him, and he was much relieved to hear it.

We crossed the street and entered Hyde Park.

‘Were you serious about travelling,’ I got straight to the point, ‘or were you merely aiming to sweep me off my feet?’

‘Name the destination and I will take you there,’ he offered grandly.

I struggled to suppress my enthusiasm, sucking in my cheeks to keep from yelling out my joy. ‘And why should you go to such lengths to secure

my happiness?’

‘To tell you the truth, Miss Granville,’ he said lightheartedly, ‘I don’t have anything better to do with my life at present. As you do have things you wish to achieve, then I shall help you achieve them.’

‘In return for your future lordship,’ I concluded.

‘Your title and estates can pass straight to our children, for all I care.’ He stopped still to look at me earnestly; his given name obviously suited him well. ‘All I want from this arrangement is the pleasure of your company for the rest of my life. And if that means that I have to follow you to the ends of the earth, then, so be it.’

My heart was touched, but I kept my head. ‘I fear that my company is not always as pleasurable as you suppose.’

‘We are none of us perfect,’ he replied.

How much did he know about my talents? Only what Lady Charlotte had told him all those years ago? Father certainly wouldn’t have mentioned them, for fear of scaring off a perfectly good suitor. ‘But you must understand that I *am different* to most people, Mr Devere.’

‘I know you are a very powerful psychic,’ he whispered, and we resumed our stroll. ‘Lady Charlotte implied you would be. Simon also told me the tale of how you saved the Cavandish family from certain ruin at the age of eight. I can’t imagine what you are capable of now, but I would feel very privileged to know.’

Was he perfect in every way? Was there nothing about me that would scare him into retreat? It was a dream come true—I kept waiting for some small difficulty to bring the whole fairytale crashing down. ‘I could reach into your mind at any given moment and know your thoughts, search your memories...do you not find that daunting?’

‘Did it scare Lord Hereford?’ he asked in good faith and then realised his query could be taken the wrong way. ‘I didn’t mean to imply that the news might have been the cause of his—’

‘I understood your meaning.’ I set him at ease. ‘Lord Hereford had already tarnished his reputation in the House of Lords and so my pursuits could do him no harm.’

I do believe Mr Devere was beginning to see why Lord Hamilton had been my first choice of husband. ‘I have no desire to be remembered for

who I was.' Mr Devere wanted to put my fears to rest on that count also. 'I'd much prefer to be remembered for what I achieved.'

I was moved. I felt like I was staring at Lord Hamilton, forty years ago. 'Then we are agreed, Mr Devere.' I smiled in encouragement, to confirm my acceptance of his proposal.

'And, after we see your father, I may make the announcement?' he asked, to be sure that he understood me correctly.

'Personally, I don't care what my father thinks.' I tested Mr Devere to find out how much he cared about the money.

'I'll just make the announcement then, shall I?'

He didn't even blink at the prospect of offending my father. *Heaven help me*, I thought, *this must be love*.

Susan had taken the liberty of seeing to all of my wedding arrangements, just in case. The dress, she'd never cancelled from my first-planned wedding. Mr Devere and I had all the same guests as those couples we were to marry alongside and they didn't even have to add two seats to the wedding table, as we had been in the wedding party in any case. Susan and her Lord Devere had booked an extra coach and two extra first class ferry tickets from Dover to Calais in northern France as their wedding gift to us.

There had only been one problem with marrying at the same time as our kin, and it was that the date was not the best day in the month we might have wed, if we intended to exercise our marriage vows on the night of the wedding. I had never thought to broach such an issue with a man before, but as I was to be a wife, I considered that I would have to get used to it. My betrothed took the news awfully well, claiming that he would never press me on that front. Still, I assured him that by the time we reached the chateau my time would have passed. I had no desire for him to think I was opposed to the idea of my wifely duties and I felt mature to have confronted the issue and avoided any chance of a misunderstanding. I considered that I might turn out to be rather better at this marriage business than I had imagined.

The wedding dress Susan had selected suited me very well. I trusted her judgement more than my own when it came to important decisions about attire.

There was a woman staring back at me from my mirror, a woman who was about to embark on an amazing adventure. I was so glad to be her.

Normally, a bride would be getting a talk from one of her parents at this point, but my mother was no longer with us and I had yet to speak to my father. It didn't appear as if he was going to break the silence either. My treasure stone itched my hand as if requesting the summons.

'Albray,' I complied. 'Albray, Albray.'

The knight leant against the wall staring at me for the longest time.

'Please say something.' I begged for an opinion.

Don't marry him, he appealed in all seriousness. *Marry me.*

He broke into a smile and I knew he was joking. 'I thought you were serious!' I held my hand to my chest when I realised he was not. 'I'm nervous enough without you giving me heart failure.'

You look absolutely beautiful. Danu shines through you this day. He pushed himself away from the wall and approached to look into the mirror with me. *If I still lived, I'd marry you myself.*

Albray had no reflection, and that was probably for the best—literally, I could never see us together. Albray would have made a fine husband. 'Did you ever marry?' I had struck a chord; he distanced himself from me.

The woman I loved was not the marrying kind.

At first I thought he meant she'd been beneath him, but I couldn't imagine Albray thinking that way and he did not sound ashamed of his love, but proud. I thought it more likely that she was an exulted being in his eyes. I wanted to ask him who she was and what had happened to her, but clearly he did not want to speak of it, and I had no desire to try exerting my will over him.

She was Lillet du Lac of the House del Acops.

The House of the Waters. I noted the English translation. Both 'del Acops' and 'du Lac' were titles cited in French Arthurian romances. Lancelot du Lac translated to Lancelot of the Lake, as in the Lady of the Lake and the Isle of Avalon. 'Was Lillet a priestess of some kind?'

Albray nodded gravely. 'And a Grail princess...much as you are.'

I scoffed at his exaggeration, although I thought it very flattering. 'Did she love you too?' The pain in his expression made me wish I hadn't asked and I quickly changed the subject. 'So you have no advice for me this day?'

He shook his head. *I can advise you along the way.* He reminded me that he was not being left behind. *But when it comes to affairs of the heart, as I have already warned you, I will be useless to you.*

I recognised Nanny's knock and I bade her enter. She fiddled with my attire, admiring my appearance, and yet she seemed a little awkward, as if she were pondering words she did not want to speak.

'If your mother had been here today,' she began, and I knew at once where the conversation was heading.

I was quick to save her the trouble.

Unlike most unmarried women my age, I actually knew what sex entailed. Love affairs are far and away what most people think about, most of the time, and being a mind-reader since birth, well...need I say more? Women of my age, gender and marital status were banned from reading any literature on the subject, including romance novels, but thankfully Susan and I had not had that kind of censorship. We were both fully aware of what marriage entailed, but having romanticised the issue in so many of our little fantasies, I feared that the big event could hardly live up to our expectations. I couldn't honestly say that I wasn't curious, if just one little kiss could cause me distraction for weeks and get me to the altar!

FROM THE TRAVEL JOURNALS OF MRS ASHLEE DEVERE

My wedding day held many surprises.

My father awaiting me at the church door was the first shock of the day. 'I know you will be happy,' was all he said before he smiled at me. It wasn't a forced smile either, although there was a certain sadness underlying it. Could it be that my father actually did care for me and was a little sentimental about my departure from his house and name? Not that I had ever been under the same roof with him for any length of time; he was probably more upset that the Granville estates would henceforth be Devere-Granville estates. In any case, Father performed his duty at my wedding with no fuss or bother, which was a great relief to me.

The huge wedding service exceeded my tolerance for church by well over an hour, but was made bearable by the smiling faces of the five people alongside me. More love than I had ever felt was emanating from the young men and women who stood with me before the altar, and my heart couldn't

help but be swept up in the euphoria. I felt my heart energy swelling in my chest and as I looked to my new husband I felt my heart centre connect with his and that was the moment our souls bonded and I began to fall in love with him.

In the carriage on the way to the wedding breakfast Mr Devere asked about our travel plans beyond France. I was not yet ready to disclose my true destination to anyone, so I said that I was still contemplating destinations, as there were so many I was interested in. 'India, Persia, South America, Van Diemen's Land!' I listed just about every place but the one I truly did want to visit, and laughed when my husband appeared wary of my choices, all the while stating he'd follow me anywhere.

At the breakfast there were many lovely toasts and speeches made by the parents of the newlyweds, but none was so surprising as that of my father, who managed to sound genuinely affectionate and proud of me.

Thus, after the formalities were out of the way and we were at liberty to mingle with our guests, I thought I'd seek Father out and make my peace with him. I was so full of love and excitement that I didn't wish to be at odds with anyone. Still, before I found him, another dear friend caught my attention.

'Lady Charlotte.' I fell on one knee to embrace her where she sat. 'I'm so glad you could come.' I wish I could have said she looked well, but her soul-mind was growing tired of being restricted by an ageing vessel.

'Mr Devere's memory proved accurate after all.' She smiled, pleased for me, and suppressed a cough.

I had forgotten that I consulted her about Mr Devere, but I now suspected that she'd known our marriage was destined all along. 'As a prophet you are second to none,' I whispered, to her amusement, although she shook her head to disagree.

'Your career will far outshine my own,' she said in all seriousness. 'You have made a good match.' She glanced over to Mr Devere. 'He is very much in love with you,' she said. 'Never doubt that he is on your side.'

'I don't doubt that any more,' I told her, as I stood once more and looked for my father. I spotted him in a quiet corner of the room, chatting with two gentlemen. Two gentlemen that I recognised, for they were the ones who were trying to warn off Lord Hamilton. 'Who are those two gentlemen?' I pointed them out to Lady Charlotte, my heart beating in my

chest. What were they doing here? Why were they talking to my father? What was their interest in me and my marriage to Devere?

‘I don’t believe I’ve had the pleasure.’ Lady Charlotte strained her eyes, but chances were she couldn’t see them properly. ‘Perhaps they are guests of the Devere family?’ she suggested.

I looked around for Mr Devere and waved my husband over when I spotted him. ‘Did you invite those gentlemen?’ I pointed to where my father stood talking with the men in question.

‘I don’t believe so,’ he replied. ‘As far as I know the wedding guest list was complete before we decided to join the festivities.’

This was quite true. I wanted to tune into my father’s thoughts and find out what he was thinking right now, but with so much noise and so many people in the room I doubted I’d have any success. I was too excited also, and my emotions were all over the place. ‘I’m going over there.’

The fire and fear underlying my words caused Mr Devere to pull me up. ‘Why don’t I find out who they are?’

‘Where are you going?’ Susan distracted both of us. ‘It’s time for the cake.’

She motioned to the huge three-stepped pyramid covered in white icing and flowers as it was wheeled into the room on a giant trolley. Three pairs of miniature newlyweds sat on the highest layer of the cake.

We were so taken with the sight that our mission was forgotten, which proved long enough for the men and my father to depart.

‘Where are they?’ I searched with Devere’s aid to no avail, and was eventually persuaded by my closest company to rejoin the festivities, as our guests were waiting.

LESSON 6

SEDUCTION

At the end of the morning's festivities, Mr Devere and I were deposited in a carriage piled high with our luggage, and sent on our merry way to our honeymoon in France.

'And that's all there is to it.' Devere turned to me in pleasant spirits. 'Now you are stuck with me for worse or better.' He grinned, nearing to kiss me, longer and deeper than he ever had before.

I was enjoying the experience immensely when I was suddenly swept back to Hartsford Park, where I saw myself knee deep in water as I grabbed to save my bonnet from being swept away by the wind. *She is the one*, he'd thought at the time, recalling Lady Charlotte's prophecy. *At home in the wilds, she'll have the look of a wood nymph about her.*

The pleasure I felt in my own body urged me to withdraw from his thoughts. His hand had come to rest upon my left breast and it tingled in anticipation of a closer acquaintance with him. I was surprised when Mr Devere retreated first.

'Whoa.' He held his head and laughed. 'Your kiss evokes euphoria.' I thought him joking until he closed his eyes to regain his equilibrium. Still, he didn't seem discomfited, but, rather, in high spirits.

It occurred to me that perhaps probing someone's mind at such close range might be draining. I didn't know, as I'd never been that close to someone before. Or perhaps it was just the high psychic energy of my being sending his being into overload? And then again, perhaps he'd just had too much to drink? 'Are you all right?'

'I shall live,' he assured me with a beaming grin. 'But if that's what a kiss will do to me, well...heaven help me.' He chuckled, as did I when I caught his meaning.

To distract me from the heat of the blush rising in my face, I decided I'd best voice something that was haunting me. 'I need to see my father.'

‘What...before we leave London?’ Mr Devere seemed surprised by my request.

‘I have to know who those men were,’ I told him honestly.

‘Why?’ he inquired, genuinely interested.

‘Because I believe they had something to do with Lord Hereford’s murder.’ My reason confused him.

‘But Lord Hereford died of natural causes,’ Devere said, stating the official truth of the matter.

‘No he didn’t.’ I was adamant. ‘And if my father had something to do —’

‘Wait one moment.’ Devere tried to calm me down. ‘How do you know those men had something to do with Lord Hereford’s death?’

‘Because they threatened him with death if he persisted with his plan of marriage...they wanted me to marry you.’ My eyes came to settle on his face, which was absorbed in thought.

‘As did your father.’ Mr Devere followed my line of thought. ‘You seriously think Lord Suffolk hired men to threaten Lord Hereford?’

‘I don’t know what to think, and that is why I need to see my father.’ I awaited his approval.

‘You know that we are expected for dinner with the rest of the wedding party. We wouldn’t want to offend our host, Lord Rochester—’

‘I never spend long in Father’s presence, so this shan’t take long, I assure you.’

‘Very well,’ and he rang the bell to alert the driver to a detour.

Devere insisted that I let him accompany me to see Lord Suffolk.

‘My father is hardly going to harm me when he knows you await me in a carriage downstairs.’ I preferred him to stay put.

‘Are you going to use your talents to get the information you desire?’ Devere whispered before I stepped out of the carriage.

‘My father has perfected a way to block me out when he needs to.’ The fact made me smile as his method was childish, but effective. ‘I’m hoping he might just tell me the truth for a change.’

I knew I was being seriously optimistic, but I scaled the stairs full of purpose nonetheless. Needless to say my father was surprised to see me.

‘Shouldn’t you be halfway to France by now?’ He motioned me to take the seat opposite, but when I declined, he stood. ‘Is there a problem?’

‘I saw something that I hope is not as malign as it appeared to be.’

‘Are we talking about the real world, or one of your visions?’ Father was looking uncomfortable already.

‘A little of both, I’m afraid.’

I saw his light-body dull, but he did not become angry. Instead, he leant his arm on the mantelpiece and hung his head like a man fed up. ‘I cannot carry this any more, and I am weary of trying to hide the truth from you.’ He looked at me as if he feared something terrible: much the same look Lord Hamilton had given me the night before he’d been killed. ‘It is my fault that you are the way you are.’

Was he speaking about my pigheadedness? No. My father was referring to my psychic ability—surely he was not psychic himself? ‘How can you have been responsible for my talents?’

Father sat down in his chair, wearied by the memory. This time when he invited me to sit in the chair opposite, I obliged. ‘When I was told that your mother was from an ancient line of Elven princesses, naturally I took the information to be an old family myth of some kind. For the Elven bloodline can be traced back to the Albigensian Crusade. In the language of old Provence a female elf was an *albi*, and Albi was the name given to the main Cathar centre of resistance in Languedoc. It is said that many of these ancient bloodline of kings fled the bloody crusade the church was waging against the Cathars and settled in Scotland.’

That seemed to explain my mother’s dying words to me. No wonder my being committed to an asylum at the age of eight had affected her so adversely, for in all probability she felt responsible for my incarceration.

‘Nevertheless,’ Father continued, ‘I was in love with her and her father made it plain that if I was to marry her, then I had to join the ancient order that protected the royal bloodline of the family.’

‘What name does the order go by?’ I didn’t want that detail omitted.

‘By many different names,’ he grouched, not liking to be interrupted, and I decided to press the matter later. ‘Their members are to be found among the rich, famous and powerful who secretly oppose church rule. Being no fan of the church myself, I joined gladly. I went to their meetings, studied their doctrine and commenced my initiation phase...the first of

which took place on my wedding night. Before I lay with your mother,' his voice became very uneasy and it wasn't that he was embarrassed, more frightened, 'the men of the family performed a rite and then fed me a glowing liquid, which to this day I cannot identify. The next thing I knew, your mother was pregnant with you.' He shrugged.

'We didn't spend all these centuries creating Miss Granville so that you could abscond with her.' I remembered the claim of the gentlemen who had threatened Lord Hamilton and it sent shivers down my spine. I *had* been bred, after all. 'What do they want with me?'

'They only wish the bloodline to be sustained and prosper. I don't know why. I quit the order soon after the drinking incident.' Father was growing weary of the subject already. He hated the supernatural and now I was beginning to see why.

'And how is Mr Devere involved in all this?'

Father shook his head. 'I don't know that he knows any more than you do. All I know is that when he made his proposal, I received a visit from some of your mother's long-quiet brethren, who advised me to condone the marriage to Devere and condemn the proposal of Lord Hereford.'

'They threatened Lord Hereford directly,' I informed my father. 'I even suspect they may have had him murdered.'

'I wasn't going to say I warned you,' Father said gently, smiling at the fact that I was aware of my stalkers before he had confessed. He obviously didn't think murder was beyond consideration. 'You know that you'll never prove it, Ashlee. You are an intelligent woman...so go travel, and live a long and happy life with your new husband.'

I looked at him, shocked. He'd never referred to me as intelligent before.

He knew why I was shocked. 'Any impression I gave you to the contrary was just my own guilt speaking. I feared your power. I feared that your power would cause you pain and anguish, and it very often has. I made some bad decisions—'

'And some good ones,' I cut in, wanting to reassure him. 'I love what I am, and I would not have it otherwise. You were not to know.' I found myself hugging him and comforting him like a small child.

'I never wanted any harm to befall you.' He trembled as he spoke.

‘No harm has ever befallen me.’ I imposed on him lightly, rubbing his back to calm him. ‘If it did, I feel quite certain it would not be your fault.’ I held him at arm’s length, rather teary-eyed myself. ‘I am my own creation. You can admire me, but you cannot claim responsibility for my destiny. Only I have that privilege.’

This was the first time I ever saw my father truly happy. I felt a great weight had lifted from my shoulders as I left his house. The complexities of one relationship were resolved as I now moved into a whole new phase of my life.

Evening fell and I was still in a carriage, en route to join the rest of our wedding party for dinner and an overnight stay at Lord Rochester’s estate. My head rested on my husband’s shoulder, while I gazed at the late spring landscape of Kent as it rushed by.

Father had not told me the name of the order to which he’d belonged, as he knew I would seek them out. Still, the little he’d told me of the order led me to wonder.

‘Do you belong to any secret societies?’ I sat up to ask Devere.

‘Do those kind of brotherhoods still exist?’

His question seemed to answer mine. ‘So, what do you know about this ancient bloodline of Kings we both belong to?’

Devere appeared startled by my knowledge. ‘I never did get around to telling you about that. Did Lady Charlotte mention it?’ He didn’t want to accuse me outright.

I could have lied. Still, if I was going to make a go of my marriage, I felt the truth was best. ‘No. I read your mind that night at Hartsford Manor.’

‘So...that was the cause of your hasty departure that night?’ Devere smiled, but I couldn’t tell if he felt amused or violated. He folded his arms as he thought about the premise some more. ‘And have you been digging around in my head on a regular basis?’

‘No, only that once. Oh, and when you kissed me earlier...but that wasn’t purposeful on my behalf,’ I realised.

‘And what did you perceive from me then?’ he queried, unable to suppress his grin, as he felt sure he’d had sex on the brain.

‘I saw your memory of me in the stream at Hartsford Park,’ I told him honestly and he seemed surprised and rather relieved.

Devere recalled the moment. ‘The scene reminded me of something John Keats wrote.

*I met a lady in the meads,
Full beautiful—a faery’s child.
Her hair was long, her foot was light,
And her eyes were wild.*

I smiled at his romantic notion. ‘A very beautiful way to avoid my question.’

His amorous mood ebbed, no doubt due to my obvious lack of romance. ‘What do I know about my bloodline? Well, I know I’m descended from Robin Hood,’ he said cheerily. ‘He was Robert de Vere.’

‘And?’ I prompted and he shrugged.

‘My family have always been close to the Crown of England and France, and so have many families. The Cavandish family for example.’

‘My father was made to join a secret brotherhood if he wished to marry my mother, and yet you have not been approached by anyone?’ I thought this odd as my blood and talents were obviously prized by some.

‘I feel I have grown beyond need of a group of allies,’ he announced, obviously not taking me very seriously. ‘And besides, they don’t sound like a very nice organisation if they would threaten a dear fellow like Lord Hereford.’

I went quiet for a moment as I contemplated all I had been told.

‘May I ask you something?’ Devere took my hands in his to get my attention. ‘You said that you’d promised Lord Hereford that you wouldn’t invade his mind—’

‘On purpose,’ I added and gave a nod. ‘Yet he never assumed to be so intimate with me as you are, Mr Devere.’

‘Then perhaps you might enlighten me as to your father’s secret defence system, so that I have some means to defend myself?’

‘If you have a clear conscience then why should you need such a defence system...hmmm?’ I toyed with him.

‘But what if I wanted to surprise you? I should have precious little chance of ever doing that.’ He struck me as a man who would get great pleasure from giving such gifts.

‘I do like surprises,’ I confessed, mulling over if I should grant his request for information. He couldn’t use this means if he were sleeping, so

if I ever really needed to extract information from him, I could. His lips gently pressed against my breastbone.

‘Please,’ he uttered, and sat upright to appeal for mercy with his big baby blues.

I reached up and played with a blond ringlet that was tucked behind his ear. It twirled around my finger and was smooth and pleasing to touch.

‘Very well, I will tell you.’

He turned his face into the palm of my hand and kissed it.

‘It’s childish,’ I admitted, ‘but it does work. Father just repeats over and over in his mind, “I’m not thinking about anything”, until I give up trying to get inside his head.’

Devere laughed. ‘Shall we give it a try?’ He moved in closer.

‘I’m game if you are.’ I kissed him and for a while I was immersed in the act, then, the next thing I knew I was looking down on myself, naked on a bed. I was being made love to, and I would have thought it was my own future sight or imagination, but then I realised I was experiencing the act from Devere’s point of view. It was strange and I pulled away.

Devere appeared in a daze again, as we gazed at each other in shock and awe.

‘It doesn’t work,’ we both concluded solemnly in unison, before bursting into laughter.

Although my wedding night was not all that a wedding night perhaps should be, it still turned out to be the best night of my life to date.

Until dawn, my dear Devere and I lay about on our bed talking, eating and getting intimately familiar with each other’s body. Although my monthly condition did not lend itself to marriage-night favours, that did not prevent my husband taking a very distinct interest in the rest of me. My breasts were a particular distraction for him, as he kept untying my chemise to admire and fondle them. The caresses of his hands and mouth were heaven to my senses, and something of a tease. Now I was the one cursing the bad timing of our wedding day, and yet Mr Devere made it plain that he was in no rush.

Something rather amazing that we did discover was that we both had the same birthmark, although in different places. It took the form of a small

red cross: mine in between my shoulderblades and Devere's in the middle of his chest.

It was hardly surprising that we slept away most of the carriage ride the next day, ate dinner with our hosts in Tunbridge, retired early and did the same thing all over again.

Upon arriving in Dover the next evening, after sleeping away the journey once again, Devere and I spent a third night wide awake. Had it not been for Nanny Beat, and Mr Devere's faithful manservant, Mr Tibbs, dressing, feeding and packing us up, we would have missed the ferryboat to Calais.

I really enjoyed the passage across the Channel. The weather was fine and cool, and my husband and I were forced to be more sociable. Mind you, the couples we were with hadn't been any more eager to socialise than we were. I couldn't help but notice how well we all looked for our confinement, how content and happy. It was quite apparent that we had all made a good match and were very much in love.

The night we spent in the port of Calais was the evening Devere came to visit me while I bathed. He dismissed Nanny and stood gazing at me from the door.

'What can I do for you, Mr Devere?' I did not feel anywhere near as inhibited by my nakedness as I imagined I might be: the water was rather soapy, and due to Devere's obsession with my breasts, I'd become quite accustomed to being half naked in his presence.

'I've come to get you drunk, Mrs Devere, and to give you pleasure.' When he approached I noticed he had two glasses and a bottle of Champagne. 'When in France...' he explained, as he knelt by the bath and placed the bottle and glasses aside on the floor.

'That sounds wonderful, but I've told you, I don't partake of impure substances.'

'I'll just move straight on to the pleasure then, shall I?' He removed his shirt, tossed it aside and then kissed me gently.

Devere's right hand caressed my breasts a moment and then diverted very directly to the one region of my body he'd yet to explore. The pleasure took me far away, not into Devere's body but deep inside my own. I heard groans of pleasure, and was completely oblivious to the fact that they were emanating from me. Devere's lips had left mine and were now enveloping

my left breast, as his fingers continued to weave their magic between my legs. I'd never imagined that any feeling could be so overwhelming that I would lose myself entirely within. I have never been more in the moment, more content to be my own being; it was intensely delicious, intimate and empowering. When I thought I could stand the pleasure no more, my body rose and with a shuddering heave I collapsed into rapture.

I heard the sound of smashing glass close by, but even that could not draw my focus from within my being. I do confess that for several moments I could do little more than breathe and enjoy the revelation of liberation, relaxation and elation I was feeling.

Devere kissed my forehead and withdrew his arm from my bath. 'Oh dear.' He collapsed to a seat on the tiled floor, and gazed at the broken bottle and accompanying glasses shattered on the floor amid the bubbly liquid.

I sat up to view his distraction and was amused by it. 'How did that happen?'

'I'm not entirely sure...I spied it floating and then...' He dropped his hands and spread his arms apart, wearing a delirious grin on his face. In fact, he appeared to be a little lightheaded. 'Are you all right?' I reached over and took his head between my hands, and kissed him with all the passion I could muster. 'That was simply wonderful.'

'I agree!' He put a hand to the floor to push himself up to standing and he managed, albeit with a bit of a stagger.

'Devere?' I was concerned now, despite the grin on his face.

'I'm good,' he assured, squinting and then opening his eyes and glaring at the plant in the corner, ahead of squinting again.

I climbed from the bath and threw on my robe. 'Tell me what is amiss with you?' I carefully avoided the glass to get to his side.

'That plant is glowing.' He pointed to it.

I looked at the healthy specimen and saw that its light-body was very prominent. 'Yes, it is,' I confirmed, 'but usually I would be the only one to notice.' I walked toward the candlelight and away from Devere. 'And what about me?'

'Oh, my Lord.' He shielded his eyes with one hand. 'Colours! You look like an angel!'

He collapsed onto his knees, not out of reverence or awe but from lack of stability.

I rushed back to his side and knelt to address him. 'I gather that this is not a normal byproduct of sexual relations?' At this, Devere laughed and shook his head. 'I'm so sorry,' I said.

'Don't be sorry,' he was quick to say. 'I feel amazing...as if I've connected with something divine within myself that I never even knew was there.'

I frowned, bemused. 'But it was you who pleased me.' I might have understood this transformation had it been the other way around...or mutual elation?

'I admit I am baffled. Each time we've kissed I've felt an inkling of an awakening. I have had lovers in the past,' he confessed a little shyly, 'and I know how euphoric intimate relations can be.'

This came as no surprise to me. Judging from that little seduction, he knew exactly how to please a woman.

'But this...' He breathed deeply, so overcome that I feared he might pass out. 'Wow! I feel like I've just been shot into the cosmos.'

I looked to the smashed bottle and glasses. 'If I caused them to levitate —'

'Well, I can assure you that I didn't,' Devere said with amusement.

I cocked an eyebrow to accept his point. 'Then my psychic energy was stimulated by my arousal, and being so close to me, perhaps some of it transferred and was absorbed by you.'

'Like a chemical chain reaction?' Devere was beginning to see where I was coming from.

'Yes, exactly.'

'I can honestly say that I could feel energy emanating from you.' He pulled me onto his lap. 'It felt every bit as empowering as it obviously was.'

'Not really what you bargained for when taking a wife, I suspect?' It was scary to imagine how inheriting my talents in adulthood would affect a psychic novice; I suspected it could be a very adverse and overwhelming experience indeed. 'I'll understand completely if this is just too weird for you.'

'I love weird. I love you.'

I hugged him for the reassurance, thinking that any other man would have disowned me, or had me committed. ‘That is well, Mr Devere, for it seems I am falling in love with you too.’

We slept that night, and the next day Devere was like a child walking around in an entirely new world. During the carriage ride that marked the final leg of our journey to the Chateau de Vere, my travelling companion was wide-eyed and full of questions. His new talent of seeing etheric energy had not ebbed at all and he marvelled at everything he saw—and everyone! Whirling chakra centres, auric hues, light-bodies, and elemental beings: it was all incredibly fascinating for him. Subsequently, Devere was doubly excited about our liaison this night; I’d opened the door to another world and he was more than ready to step right into that new dimension.

It was wonderful to finally arrive at the chateau. The stately country manor had fallen out of the hands of the Devere family late last century. The place had been looted and gutted during the Revolution, and then fully restored after the fall of Napoleon. This was where Lady Charlotte had been basing herself before she’d been my governess and I could tell she’d had a hand in the refurbishment of the structure. The artworks were strong with hidden esoteric content, and the decoration of the chateau reflected the harmony and beauty of the Dowager Countess herself.

It was also a real blessing to be coming to a stop for a while and to have accommodation of our own. All the way here we’d been somebody’s guests by arrangement, but this night we dined only with our brothers and sisters and it was a very merry meal. Everyone was in such fine spirits that no one noticed that my husband was observing everything a little oddly, nor that he was in an especially expansive mood.

When dessert was polished off, Lord Devere posed a poignant question. ‘So, shall we adjourn to the drawing room?’ Everyone went silent and looked at someone else to make the decision. ‘Or are we all so weary from our journey that we are ready to retire at this unfashionably early hour?’

The ensuing laughter and garbled confessions of fatigue indicated a unanimous response to the latter suggestion.

Once it was agreed, Devere and I wasted no time in bidding all goodnight. We raced each other up the staircase and, at the top, he swept me

up to carry me into our quarters. We encountered Nanny Beat in our boudoir, stoking up the fire. She was quick to rise, bid us goodnight and make an exit. She knew as well as I did that my monthly dilemma was over and that tonight I would lose my virtue.

‘I’m quite sure she’s psychic too,’ Devere uttered with good humour as he watched Nanny close the door behind her and he continued into the bedroom.

‘Just observant,’ I assured him.

Although the bed was turned down, Devere laid me on the lounge chair in front of the fire and then sat on the floor beside me. ‘Are you apprehensive?’

How could he ask after our previous passionate encounter? ‘I am far more concerned about how you will survive this union...for myself, I am determined.’ I lured him to a long and luscious kiss.

My breasts were bypassed altogether this night. His hand was already clearing a trail through my petticoats, up my inner thigh and straight to the site of my elation yesterday. His lips left mine, though I barely noticed until his mouth, and the kisses therefrom, replaced his fingers in the exploration of my most private places and his hands were thus at leisure to part his target wide. I died and went to heaven in that moment—that powerful place inside myself, deep and dark like an abyss, and yet full of cosmic promise and my own infinite possibilities. The pleasure in my body eventually drew me back to my conscious self; the physical sensation was so intense, but release was imminent.

Devere emerged from my skirts and slid himself between my open legs. We made eye contact and it was plain that he was off in his own little world too. I hoped that I would make this experience as pleasurable for him as he was making it for me.

Unlike the day before, Devere proceeded with painstaking care and by the time he was fully inside me, we both collapsed into rapture at once. The mirror over the fireplace shattered and various pictures and ornaments around the room came crashing to the floor.

I would have laughed if I hadn’t been so otherwise emotionally detained. ‘I can see we are going to have to nail down our bedroom furniture.’ I kissed Devere’s neck.

He chuckled, but as he'd yet to recoup his sensibilities he didn't raise himself.

'Are you still with me, Devere?' I brushed the blond curls from his face, hoping to find his eyes.

'Only just.' He drew a deep breath, and attempted to stir himself from his euphoria.

'Shall I help you over to the bed?' I did hope that was not going to be the end of our fun and games this evening.

The suggestion made him smile. 'How about I help you?' He rose to meet the challenge and swept me up with him.

By the time the candles and the fire in our room were burning low, Devere was unconscious and I found myself alone and wide awake. I was lying beside him, admiring his beauty as he slept. His light-body was ablaze with activity, so clearly our physical relations had triggered some energetic reaction in him—the spinning vortexes of his subtle body whirled ever faster. My eyes became transfixed on his third eye area as the energy centre there pulsed silver and faded to indigo by the time the life force was absorbed by the coiling serpent of his kundalini. I wondered how he fared and a vision filled my eyes.

The imposing fellow who had confronted Lord Hamilton over his marriage to me was addressing me directly. *Your personal power will only be realised upon her pleasure.*

I sat up, startled from my concentration as I realised this was Devere's memory. 'He lied,' I muttered under my breath, unable to believe it. *Don't be hasty*, I warned myself, recalling how Lady Charlotte had advised me not to doubt my husband's devotion to me. I relaxed onto the bed beside him, to regain my focus. Once I was calmer, the impression of the unknown gentleman returned.

Keep her safe, Devere, he instructed sternly. *Learn about her, learn from her and keep me posted. If you can please this woman, you will become a very powerful man indeed. And, with any luck, you'll have many, many adept offspring.*

Tears were rolling down my face for I'd always considered that Devere's love was too good to be true. *How do you know this man?* I

queried his subconscious directly, and I perceived something then that I did not expect.

It was Lady Charlotte, just as I'd seen her in Devere's memory that night at Hartsford Manor. Speaking to me from her quiet corner, the oracle had my undivided attention, even though I was vaguely aware that someone else had entered the room in which she sat. *And to better prepare the way for this woman coming into your life, you might want to speak with this gentleman.*

I turned and there he was. He had a little more hair and was minus a few pounds, but this was definitely the fellow who had threatened Lord Hamilton.

'Not only did Devere lie to me about that man, but they have a long acquaintance!'

I had grabbed my treasure stone and summoned Albray to the boudoir, so I could pour out my woes to him.

'What if Devere had a hand in killing Lord Hereford?'

We never established without a doubt that Lord Hereford was murdered, my knight suggested in a reasoned and calm tone.

'Even Lady Charlotte seems to have had more of a hand in manipulating my destiny than I had otherwise imagined...can I trust no one?'

You can trust me, Albray stated consolingly, although I was not really listening.

I was furious when I thought about my intimate encounters with Mr Devere over the past few days. 'Learn from me, protect me, please me... Ooooooh!'

Do you want to wake him up? This was Albray's way of suggesting that I turn my temper down.

I waved off his concern. 'I think my energies have exhausted him.' Which reminded me... 'Is there anything in this Star-Fire lore regarding my talents rubbing off on those close to me?'

Truly? Albray seemed intrigued but not entirely surprised. *Devere has had an awakening?*

I assumed Albray would know this, as I understood we were psychically linked. When I queried this with him I was informed that we

were only telepathically linked when I was wearing my charm on my person, and for the past few days I'd placed the stone in the red book for safe cartage. 'You sound as if you suspected our relationship might empower him.'

Not exactly, he said defensively. But there was a legend known to my order which claimed that the ambrosia of immortality, Amrita, was released from the reproductive glands of a Grail princess when she was awakened by her prince.

'Devere is not my prince!' I protested, growing angrier by the second. *Amrita then triggers a similar secretion in the prostate gland of the said prince . . . Albray ignored my dramatics...whereupon he is endowed with greater powers of awareness, perception and intuition. This awakening is known as the quickening.*

'You could have mentioned this before I married Devere! If he becomes adept enough, he might be able to read my mind. If my husband ever found out about my secret inheritance, my one chance at independence and true freedom would be thwarted!' Not to mention what might happen if Hamilton's treasure ended up in the wrong hands.

The ambrosia was supposedly to the mutual benefit of both parties, Albray added, hoping this information might ease my panic.

'So this chemical reaction, Amrita, has enhanced my natural ability also?' Albray nodded, and I considered that it might explain the floating furniture. I looked to the leather pouch on the table that contained my travel papers and, no sooner had I wished it, than they had flown into my possession. I gasped at the achievement.

Good *Lord!* Albray was impressed as well.

'And nobody knows about this little development,' I said, with a new confidence, slipping the leather binder into my hand. I smiled, chuffed.

You wish to depart, my lady? Albray knew my mind.

'Yes...but Devere and his order will surely pursue me.'

I think we could lose him with a few days head start...a good sleeping spell ought to do the trick.

'You know a sleeping spell?' I was stunned. He didn't seem the type for spells.

No, he confessed, *but I can introduce you to a dead gypsy witch who does.*

Chiara was an amazing spirit, full of information about all things mystical. Her price for acceding to my request was that she might ask a return favour of me once I made it to Italy, to which I agreed.

The sleeping spell should be easy enough for you to perform, she told me in her own tongue, mainly Italian. She was dressed as though she'd just come from washing the clothes and she kept wiping her hands on her apron.

'How about a forget-me-altogether spell?' I suggested an even better idea.

The jolly round woman laughed and said emphatically, *You are a Grail princess!* She became deadly serious. *This boy...he never forgets you.*

I didn't like the sound of that prophecy, so I avoided seeking any further information on that score. 'Did Albray tell you about my bloodline?'

There was no need. If Albray answered your request for protection and knowledge, then it must be so.

'And you are sure this spell will work?' It seemed so simple.

I know my craft, she assured me in a way that indicated I had not caused offence. *Your ancestors are very powerful spirits. You shouldn't be afraid to summon them to your aid. They will come, you will see.*

'What do you know of my ancestry, Chiara?'

Ah... she waved off the notion of pursuing that topic. Many, many things. But Albray is the historian ... I just do spells.

I wrote Devere a letter as instructed, and placed a lock of his hair inside, as well as some thread from his clothes and a copy of my incantation. I sealed the envelope. 'Sweet dreams, Mr Devere.'

Two days head start was the maximum time I could secure without risk of physically harming my subject. Although feeling betrayed, I could not bring myself to hate the man I'd grown so fond of, and I was sorry that his love was not as true as I felt mine was.

I gazed at my sleeping husband and wondered aloud. 'How can it be that his treachery is not evident in his light-body?'

Because only conflict registers, Albray explained. *If Mr Devere feels he has been doing the right thing, then he does not carry any guilt or remorse, and there is no dis-ease within him to cause blockages and shadows.*

‘I see.’ It did make sense and it also made me angry. How little I must figure in his heart. His ego must be huge if he could believe he had done me no harm with his lies.

Holding the envelope above his sleeping body, I recited the spell Chiara had helped me develop to suit my intent.

Women of my blood from whence my essence flowed, lend me your charms, to create a deep repose.

This man I wish to sleep, I appeal you, make it so, until twice the moon does come and go.

Let him sleep deeply, dream sweetly, awake safely, and not miss me.

I repeated the spell twice more.

Chiara told you that a forget-me spell will not work. Albray had a chuckle at the addition I had made.

‘Nothing ventured, nothing gained,’ I justified, tucking the envelope under Devere’s pillow.

Fortunately, very few of my things had been unpacked yet. I only had three trunks, but I realised it might as well have been fifty trunks, with no servants to move them for me.

What about your new talent? Albray dismissed my complaints with a reminder.

I crept down the main staircase, my trunks piled one on top of another trailing me silently.

We could steal a carriage, Albray suggested.

‘These people are my friends. I’m not going to steal from them,’ I whispered.

‘Who are you talking to?’

I gasped when I saw a figure at the bottom of the steps. The trunks fell with a thud behind me, but I was quick to regain my focus and prevent them crashing down the stairs. It took a moment for my mind to register the voice and face—to my great relief it was Susan.

‘Susan, you scared me!’

‘Are you leaving, Ashlee?’ She sounded heartbroken, and a little perturbed by my floating luggage. ‘What has happened?’

‘It seems that intimate relations have a strengthening effect on my talents.’ I was frank and Susan was amused and then panicky.

‘Mr Devere hasn’t hurt you, has he? You both seemed so happy at dinner.’

‘No, not like that.’ Dinner suddenly seemed an eternity past. ‘My dear friend...I have to go, and I don’t have time to explain why. Please, just pretend this meeting never took place.’

‘When will I see you again?’ She grabbed hold of my hand to prevent my leaving. ‘Will you write?’

‘Under an alias perhaps. It could be our little secret. Can I trust you?’

‘Of course,’ Susan vowed in a whisper, ‘but why should you need an alias?’

I persuaded her to join me outside the front door and when my baggage caught up, I closed the doors behind us.

We were both startled to find a waiting carriage, and some of the house staff in attendance to load my trunks—which I lowered to the ground promptly. Nanny Beat was by the carriage door and was dressed for travelling.

‘Dear Nanny.’ I really appreciated her sentiment, but I quickly made my way to her side to decline. ‘I fear my journey will be perilous—’

‘All the more reason for me to come,’ she replied surely.

She was as strong as an ox and as stubborn as a mule, so there seemed little point in debating the issue.

‘Write and tell me everything,’ Susan said urgently, as I was hurried to my transport.

‘I will.’ I kissed her and hugged her close—the gods only knew when I’d be in the company of my dearest friend again. ‘I left a note for Devere that might enlighten you to a few of my worries.’ I climbed into the carriage after Nanny and the door was closed behind us. ‘Love life, be happy, stay healthy. Until we meet again.’

‘You have not left my sight, and I miss you already.’ Susan blew me a kiss as the carriage began to move off.

When I could no longer see her, I leant back in my seat and drew a deep breath. I was actually doing it, pursuing the great adventure I'd always dreamed of. I took hold of Nanny's hand and smiled. I was so thankful to have her with me, and Albray, too, of course.

That wasn't difficult now, was it? he commented from the empty seat opposing us.

I was at odds about the question—my heart was shattered by my failed romance, but also exulting to be on the run, free of everyone and everything that had ever held authority over me.

PART 2

MIA

21ST CENTURY

AUSTRALIA

LESSON 7

INHERITANCE

The phone ringing disturbed my reading.

Let the machine take a message, I decided, because I did not want to budge. The journal of my great-great-grandmother was proving to be much more intriguing than I had first imagined. It seemed very racy for a nineteenth century written account, and I wondered why Ashlee had included the intimate details of her seduction. Perhaps she had never meant the journal to be read and the book had become an heirloom by accident?

The ringing of the phone persisted. Clearly I'd forgotten to switch it over to the answering machine, and the thought occurred that the call could be work related.

No, I'm taking a holiday! I was determined to stay put with the journal. *But then, it could be an interesting job.*

Mind you, ancient linguistics and archaeology had not proven to be quite as enlightening and adventure-filled as I had fantasised when a student.

To date, every ancient text I had been employed to decipher usually read something like '3 pigs and 2 goats paid to so-and-so by so-and-so', or 'dedicated to the god whoever-it-may-be', or 'the Emperor of wherever'. Of course, such lists and their language assist in pinpointing the age of certain relics and give researchers lots of wonderful information, but still, some gossip from the past would be nice, too.

My passion for ancient languages had been inspired by my grandmother, who had inherited the obsession from her grand-aunt, Charlotte. Grandmother had certainly sparked my interest in Eastern languages when I was five and she began teaching me Hebrew. I went on to study Greek, French and Latin in high school.

I began a degree in ancient languages and archaeology at the University of Sydney, and then transferred to New York University. I wanted to major in ancient Semitic languages and studied under a

prominent professor who had gained invaluable field experience with Sir Leonard Woolley on his famous excavation of the royal tombs of Ur. Originally discovered by Mr J.E. Taylor in 1956, Ur interested me greatly because of the large number of ancient Sumerian tablets that had been uncovered there.

I eventually returned to the University of Sydney to pursue my own field experience on an Australian expedition in Pella, Jordan. They were investigating the occupation of the site from earliest times down to the Islamic period. During the course of the many archaeological digs I have been employed on since, I have rarely been presented with the opportunity to use my knowledge of Semitic languages. There are locally-born historians in the Eastern lands who, unfortunately for me, will always be greater authorities on these languages.

However, there was not one of my peers, mentors or professional associates to date who would deny that I had a natural aptitude for learning and deciphering ancient script. Sooner or later my hard work and good reputation were bound to reach the attention of some project director in the Middle East and I would finally score myself a stint on a groundbreaking, career-making, expedition.

My ancestor's tale had made me itch to decipher some mysterious ancient code full of mystery and legendary tales. I finally made a dash for the phone, fearing that my complacency might cost me my dream gig.

'Hello, Montrose speaking,' I hastily said, feeling sure my caller would have, at that moment, decided to hang up!

'Bonsoir, Mia, you are there. Fantastic!'

I recognised the voice at once—the French accent gave him away. *'Bonjour, Andre.'* I managed to keep the apprehension out of my voice, although I rolled my eyes.

I had met Andre five years ago on Project Troad—an excavation of the ancient city of Troy in northwest Turkey. He was the man everyone called when they needed heavy machinery at certain stages of excavation or at certain types of sites—if Andre could not get the job done without damaging the site, then the excavation would be an impossibility or far too labour intensive and expensive.

Andre had made no secret of the fact that he was after my body. He was a complete slut himself! To his credit he was a mine of information and

a great people person, which did make him an excellent work contact. But working with Andre would mean fending off his advances for whatever length of time my services were needed—not a scenario I cherished.

‘Guess where I am?’ He teased me briefly. ‘Mt Serâbit.’

‘The Sinai!’ I repressed a squeal of excitement. I had just been reading about the place.

‘Exactly,’ he gloated, knowing he was dangling the right bait in front of my nose. ‘And guess what else? It’s an American-funded excavation, so they want to bring in one of their own translators to verify what the locals are telling them.’

‘I’m an Australian, Andre.’

‘*Oui*, but you studied at NYU and when I sang your praises, they told me to call you in.’

‘What did you tell them?’

‘I told them that the scenery out here is too harsh and we need you to add a little beauty to the surroundings.’

Did it matter that I was so qualified it was ridiculous? ‘No, Andre. You surely didn’t?’ I pleaded.

‘Oh...of course I told them that you have a natural aptitude for ancient Semitic that is second to none!’ He sounded a little hurt. ‘What kind of a businessman do you take me for? I’m hardly going to recommend anyone but the best. I have my reputation to consider—’

‘You’re an angel, Andre.’ I knew exactly how to handle his little passionate outbursts. ‘It is an honour to be held so high in your esteem. Now, are you going to tell me what you guys have unearthed over there?’

‘We think it might be another entrance into the mountain.’

‘A mine entrance?’ I wondered. The mount was littered with many old mine shafts, as the region had once been rich in turquoise.

‘I wouldn’t think so. You remember those two wands found here early last century, made of an unidentified hard material...they were outside the Portico Court in the temple complex of Hathor? This entrance is made of the same substance and we can’t even make a scratch on it. We’re hoping the accompanying inscriptions might be able to tell us where to find a key.’

‘Well, what did the locals tell you about the inscriptions?’ I walked back to the trunk, filled with old family journals, from which I’d plucked

the memoirs of my great-great-grandmother at random. 'The language is Egyptian, I gather?'

'It's more like the ancient Semitic that was found under the Egyptian inscriptions in the Hathor Complex.'

'Mmmm...' I was becoming intrigued.

'And the local translators are saying there is a curse on any man who opens the doors.'

'Well, I'm a woman, so there shouldn't be a problem,' I commented flippantly.

'My reasoning exactly,' Andre laughed. 'I've already booked you a flight, it leaves tomorrow. Check your email for details. *A bientôt!*'

He was gone. 'Hmm...so much for my holiday.' I pressed the off button and tossed the phone onto the lounge. 'Hey, it's my dream gig.' My heart fluttered with excitement, and I took a deep, calming breath. 'I wonder what the catch is?'

God, I hoped that Andre was not dragging me out into the middle of nowhere to satisfy his lovelorn longings. Still, I would be curious to see the place that my ancestor had wanted to visit. It seemed quite a coincidence that I was now heading to the same mountain that had intrigued my foremother so much nearly two hundred years ago. 'I wonder if she got there?' I looked back to the blue book I'd unlocked and begun to read this morning.

These journals had been passed down through the women of my family for six generations and yet I had only learned of them just this week. My aunt had stored the chest in a safe place for her daughter, but she had only borne sons. So, having cleared the chest out of her attic, she had thought it appropriate to give it to me, the daughter of her younger sister. Many of my ancestors had been travellers and budding archaeologists and I was the only member of the present-day family with such interests.

I was now tempted to sit down and continue Ashlee's tale. 'You have no time to read,' I lectured myself. 'You have to pack.'

Then I noticed that among the other volumes in the chest were the two other books Lord Hereford had given Ashlee Granville. The green volume was no doubt filled with information about Mt Serâbit, but what did the red book now contain? Had Ashlee made it to the mountain to return her unusual vial or was it still contained within the book?

My fingers fumbled with the three tiny keys, attached to a metal key ring, that still had a small tattered remnant of the green ribbon attached to it. I sat and pulled the red book into my lap. When the gold key was placed in the corresponding lock, the book opened and inside I found...nothing. It was completely empty and I felt very disappointed.

‘Well, I guess it means that Ashlee got there.’ I smiled, proud of her. ‘So, why pass this case on for so many generations? *Hold everything.*’ I felt around on the faded velvet padding until I found a hard patch, which I then pressed, and the secret compartment was exposed.

There was padding in the back to prevent the contents bouncing around. The jewels and ancient currency were gone and all that remained were a half bottle of ancient insect repellent, smelling like death itself, and one small river stone with a hole in the middle.

‘Oh, my Lord.’ I picked up the pebble and had a giggle, wondering if there was still a handsome mediaeval knight attached. I was not really knowledgeable, or even very interested, in the spirit world, and having read about Ashlee’s fascination with this stone, I felt sure she was semi-delusional. Did I dare to test my theory? ‘Albray, Albray.’ I paused and then laughed at the fact that I was almost expecting a mediaeval knight to appear. ‘Albray.’

And you are?

I jumped out of my skin at the question and again when I spotted him standing by my fireplace.

He was just as Ashlee had described—dark, ruggedly handsome and very warrior-like. He had a sword strapped to his hip and another upon his back, between his shoulder blades.

‘I am...’ I was so taken by the sight of him that I forgot everything, even my own name. He was emanating a celestial brilliance that was mesmerising to look at, and I wondered how it was that Ashlee had not been more enamoured of his company.

You are, Albray decided to answer on my behalf, *the first of your line to get so far into the story as to fathom my existence and summon me forth.* He frowned. *I wonder why fate would have it so? What is going on in your world right now?* he asked earnestly.

‘Well,’ I gathered my wits to respond. ‘I’m going to Mt Serâbit tomorrow, to investigate a recently unearthed entrance to the mountain.’

Albray clicked his fingers in delight. *Bullseye. What year is this?*

‘This is the year 2004,’ I advised, feeling self-conscious as he looked me over.

‘Women wear much less these days,’ he noted, apparently pleased by the trend.

I looked down at my singlet and old jeans. I wasn’t even wearing a bra. My fine, white-blond wavy hair really needed a wash and was gathered back in a scruffy knot. ‘Well, I wasn’t exactly ready for company,’ I said, justifying my appearance.

But you summoned me?

‘I didn’t expect the summons to work!’ I laughed as I thought that much must be plainly obvious to him.

But you’ve read Miss Granville’s journal?

‘Some of it,’ I granted, ‘but as a scholar I don’t take any notice of all that spiritual nonsense. I think my foremother had a very grand imagination...she should have been a fiction writer.’

You’re not a medium then? He was suddenly very concerned about my potential, it seemed.

‘No, I’m a small,’ I jested, but Albray was not laughing, he was pacing. ‘Sorry. But I truly don’t understand what is happening here.’

You must have some talent? he stopped still to inquire.

‘I have a doctorate in ancient languages,’ I told him, but he looked puzzled, so I explained, ‘I have a broad knowledge of ancient languages.’

That is a trait of your line, he conceded, looking a little happier. *Do you have a birthmark?*

I was taken aback by his query, as indeed I did have such a mark. I nodded. ‘A small red cross, like the one Ashlee described in her journal. Still, I have yet to read about its significance, if indeed it has one.’

May I see the mark? Albray asked politely.

I raised both my hands to cover the birthmark’s location under my singlet. ‘I don’t think I really know you well enough.’

I see. The knight repressed a grin when he realised the mark’s location. *Well, I’m afraid I need verification...and as I am no longer embodied, I can surely be of no threat to you.*

This guy worked faster than Andre—not five minutes in my company and he was asking to see my tits. Well, my cleavage, anyway. ‘Oh, all

right!’ It wasn’t like I was super-modest at the best of times. I pulled down my neckline to expose the mark to the right of my heart.

Albray smiled when he saw the mark, but it was more relief than gratification. Does *anyone else in your family bear this mark?*

‘They say my mother had a faint one on her back. But as she is long gone and I am an only child, I have no real knowledge of it.’ I shrugged, but he quietly awaited more information. I thought harder. ‘I don’t have any female cousins that I know of. My aunt has not mentioned having a birthmark...nor whether any of her boys have one. It had never been an issue before I read Ashlee’s journal which suggests that she believes she was descended from some ancient line of priest kings.’ I righted my attire.

No, Albray corrected. Miss *Granville never really believed it until she reached Mt Serâbit.*

‘Why, what happened to her there?’ I was curious about my destination.

Albray raised his eyebrows, and grinned to keep me in suspense. *What is the point of taking the journey, if you already know the outcome?*

‘Oh, come on,’ I bantered. ‘I have to pack tonight. I don’t have time to read great-great-gran’s ancient epic before I go. Can’t you just tell me what happens, so I know what to expect?’ I suddenly realised what a coup it was to have Albray as an adviser, at my beck and call for this journey.

He observed me quietly and I had the feeling that he was not pondering my request for information. *What is your name?*

‘Mia Montrose.’

Well, Miss Montrose, he said rather formally, I believe it would be in your best interests to take this journey one step at a time. And I am not at your beck and call. I have made no pact with you, as I did with Miss Granville.

Jesus! He could read my mind as long as the stone was on my person. I’d forgotten about the telepathic connection. ‘I apologise. I’m new to this psychic business and I don’t know the protocol. However,’ I stood and confronted him, ‘you seem to need a ride to where the action is and I am going that way. So what can you do for me in return? I have no desire to become a psychic.’

If you can see and hear me then you already are, Albray replied in a cool, confident and yet amiable way. *And as you may have learned from*

Miss Granville's experience, an untrained psychic is more exposed to manipulation from outside forces than a trained one.

‘Look, that is ridiculous!’ I definitely did not want to believe him. ‘I haven’t had visions, seen ghosts, auras, alien beings or anything else magical before today!’

Albray just smiled and vanished.

‘I didn’t mean any offence,’ I appealed to the empty room, fearing he’d gone, when I suddenly felt a kind of tingly sensation, first through my back then all through my body. I felt strong and brave, until I discovered I no longer had control of my actions.

My hand clutched the hilt of an ancient broadsword which I had hung on the wall. I began to wield it with such style and confidence that my fear turned to elation, yet I could not make my mouth form a smile. Then I abruptly brought the sword to rest at my own throat, which made Albray’s argument all too clear.

As suddenly as I’d been seized, I was free again. My arm now felt the weight of the sword it held and the tip dropped to the floor so hard it left an indent in the timber.

‘Holy mother of god!’ I panted in the wake of my sudden burst of energy. I’d never felt so dizzy in all my life.

And you are about to enter ancient places where the spirits of the dead abound.

Fear gripped my heart. If what he said was true, I could be made to do anything. I had no desire to be possessed by an ancient wraith; I was a danger to myself and others. ‘If you agree to advise, teach and protect me, I shall take you to Mt Serâbit.’ I was too overawed and terrified to debate the issue any further tonight.

Then we are agreed.

LESSON 8

TRAVEL

I packed the green and blue volumes into my luggage, which made it weigh a ton once I added the other reference books I needed. I would have loved to continue reading Ashlee's tale during the long flight, but the book was just too damn cumbersome to take on the plane as hand luggage. I packed the aged insect repellent in an airtight container to take along. Perhaps I could get it analysed and find out what the hell was in it? I attached a leather tie to Albray's stone and wore it around my throat, like a choker; in the light of recent events it was reassuring to know he was close by and, unlike Ashlee, I had no fear of being branded as a pagan for wearing it.

During the flight I reviewed the archaeological history of the mount. I didn't find any reference to the work Douglas Hamilton had done at the site, but Douglas was the first to admit that he had barely scratched the surface of the project. Serious excavation at Serâbit began nearly a century later in 1903, when Sir William Flinders Petrie unearthed the Hathor Temple complex. The sacred shrine was full of alchemical apparatus dating from the time of the Third Egyptian Dynasty through to the Eighteenth Dynasty that spawned Tutankhamen, Amenhotep III, Akhenaton, Queen Hatshepsut and Thutmose III.

In the Serâbit temple complex, over fifty tonnes of white powder had been discovered—a substance which was currently classified as exotic matter composed of monatomic platinum-group elements extracted from gold, meteors, and some mineral-rich soil of the Nile. It was conjectured that this white powder was one of the ingredients of the Bread of Light, the others being the asena bush and the acacia tree. The latter two ingredients were still being used to make a bread that was said to have great healing properties. The bread was shaped in a symbol sacred to the Egyptians—a circle with a hole in it, representing the eye of Ra.

I couldn't help but consider the stone I wore.

Do you not even wonder at the shape of your amulet? Why it had to be round with a hole in the middle? I recalled Albray posing the question to Ashlee.

Was Egypt the connection that predestined the shape of the enchanted stone? Ashlee had not recorded whether she had questioned Albray about the symbolism of the stone, for ring symbolism was rife among secret orders throughout the ages. I really liked wearing the ordinary little stone; I liked what it said about me: earthy, immaterial, and yet mysterious.

Many other curious items had been found within the courts and halls of the Hathor complex: carved stone rectangular tanks and circular basins, alabaster cups in the shape of lotus flowers, and a good collection of glazed plaques, cartouches and scarabs. Sacred ornaments worked in spirals or with spiral markings were retrieved from the earth, along with basketwork and two conical stones that differed in size. The most curious find, however—apart from the wands made of a hard material that Andre had mentioned on the phone—was the unearthing of a metallurgist's crucible in one of the several chambers where the white powder had been found.

This white powder sounded suspiciously like that which Ashlee Granville claimed to have in her vial, although from all accounts the powder at the site was not glowing or levitating. My text mentioned that the powder made at Serâbit combined three ingredients to produce the Bread of Life; was it only when all the ingredients were combined that the atoms of the substance achieved a high-spin, gravity defying state?

Since my acquaintance with Albray, I wasn't doubting my great-great-grandmother's sanity as much as I first had when reading her journal. Albray was proof that there was magic in the world, and if that much of Ashlee's tale was true, then...?

I couldn't wait until I had the opportunity to sit down and read on.

I switched planes at Cairo and caught a flight to Sharm el-Sheikh at the southern tip of the Sinai Peninsula. Andre's email had advised that a helicopter would meet me there and take me to the site at Mt Serâbit. The closest accommodation was too far away to serve the purposes of the excavation, so they had established a base camp closer to the mount.

My long flight ended at Sharm right on midday and it was stinking hot—and for an Aussie girl that was really saying something.

‘Dr Montrose?’

I turned from collecting my baggage to be confronted by a tall local fellow attired in black—I imagined he was an assassin for a second.

‘I am Akbar, your escort out to the mountain.’

Akbar’s pale brown eyes were intense and mesmerising. His olive skin, and the long black curls that extended around his neck from under his head covering, made his light coloured eyes all the more striking. ‘I thought Andre was sending a helicopter?’ I wondered why I should need a guide.

‘Foreigners are forbidden to leave the main roads unescorted,’ he explained congenially, and lifted my two heavy suitcases with such ease that, had I not hauled them off the luggage belt myself, I would have thought they’d been emptied. ‘Our transport is this way.’

I followed him out into the hot sun, placing a scarf over my head and around my shoulders, a wide-brimmed hat on top, and, of course, sunglasses, as I never slept well on planes.

Over the top of my long loose trousers and long-sleeved shirt, I wore a neck to calf length, heavy-weave cotton top that was done up all the way down to the knee. Made from beautiful Indian cotton, this clothing was the coolest outfit I owned that was also modest enough not to give offence in these parts.

The chopper pilot was an American guy, employed by the project to run errands. He introduced himself as Marty and seemed a cheery, confident kind of fellow.

My guide took a back seat in the helicopter while I sat beside our pilot in the front and strapped myself in.

‘Here.’ Marty handed me a one-litre bottle of fresh spring water. ‘Courtesy of the C & M Excavation. Don’t go anywhere without it and keep drinking constantly, as you’ll be surprised how fast you dehydrate.’

‘Thanks.’ I followed his advice gladly and drank down a quarter of a litre before coming up for air. ‘Who does the C and M stand for?’

‘James Conally, who is on-site and heading the excavation,’ Marty replied as he raised our transport into the air, ‘and Christian Molier...he’s the money.’

The stone at my neck began to itch my skin. It hadn’t bothered me before now, I thought. Perhaps I was having a reaction to the stone due to the extreme heat? Whatever the cause, I removed it, and placed it in my

pocket.

The flight out to the Serâbit site was spectacular. Marty flew by Mt Sinai, which was still widely believed to be the mountain where Moses had received the Ten Commandments, despite the fact that there was not a trace of archaeological evidence to support that belief. In the shadow of the mountain was the impressive monastery of St Catherine, a centre of religious life in the Sinai. We also flew over the Pearl of the Sinai at Feiran, the largest oasis on the peninsula, which has a spectacular and extensive sprawl of palm trees. Legend has it that Moses struck a rock with his staff at this oasis so as to bring forth a spring to save his people.

But, for me, Mt Serâbit was more awe-inspiring than all of the above, for it had sheer drops from very dizzying heights and I was thankful to see that this was not the case all the way around the mount. The pillars of the Temple of Hathor dominated one side of the mountain and, as construction dated to around 2900BC, this building was far more alluring than either a monastery or an oasis. The mountainside was also dotted with ancient turquoise mines which had inscriptions in an early proto-Sinaitic script. Now I ask you, what could possibly top that in my eyes?

On approach I could see the layout of the excavation. Atop of the mount were the remains of the Hathor Complex. A dirt road, wide enough to cater to tourist buses, extended down from this and where it circled around the mountain a second excavation was taking place—Andre's mysterious entrance no doubt. Further below was base camp.

The helipad was on another dusty plateau that was apart from the excavation sites, and a dirt road led to a T-intersection with the winding mountain road that you could follow upwards to the Hathor complex, or downwards to the new excavation and base camp. As my transport took position over the landing site I spied Andre waving up at me, and I must admit that I was pleased to see a familiar face.

'Mia!' Andre kissed both my cheeks in turn as soon as I was in range and then held me at arm's length to admire the rest of me. 'You look fantastic!'

With Andre *everything* was fantastic. 'You're looking...' I tried to be kind, so instead of saying sunburned and dusty, I said '...windswept and interesting.'

‘I know I look a mess.’ He looked down at his clothing and shrugged. ‘I’ve been working. Come, let me show you.’

As I was urged to follow Andre’s lead, I looked back to see Marty handing my bags to Akbar. ‘But—’

‘Akbar will see your luggage to your tent.’ Andre waved off my concern. ‘We have better things to do.’

Akbar didn’t seem the bag boy type to me. As I said, I’d mistaken him for an assassin on first sight. ‘I very much appreciate it,’ I called back to him over the sound of the chopper, and Akbar merely nodded. He was not the expressive type either.

I followed Andrew down the road from the helipad to where it joined the mountain road, and then turned right to follow this to the new excavation site, which had been fenced off to keep any nosy tourists at bay. C & M Excavation had unearthed a large disc-shaped feature that appeared to be constructed of normal white gold. The large disc was inset in walls that were composed of the same mysterious polished precious metal as the inner disc and the wands discovered here early last century.

‘Where is everyone?’ I’d expected to see work in progress.

‘After we uncovered the doorway, we dropped back to a skeleton crew until we knew what we were dealing with.’

The hieroglyphs I was here to translate were inset in a circular band around the central disc—this band appeared to be of dense, polished black rock.

‘What makes you think this is an entrance and not a decoration of some kind?’ I inquired, awe in my voice as I briefly touched the smooth surface, but as it was extremely hot my fingers recoiled.

‘Well, besides the inscription allegedly mentioning a door, we’ve taken readings to gauge the thickness of the surrounding wall...it is five feet thick, and then hollow.’ Andre raised his eyebrows to heighten the sense of drama. ‘But this central circle is only one foot thick.’

‘So drill it,’ I suggested.

‘I told you on the phone.’ Andre was emphatic. ‘We can’t even scratch off a particle to have it analysed, let alone drill it! It may only look like polished metal but it’s harder than iron ferrite.’

‘What about this black-band seal?’ I queried, hating the thought of having to harm the exquisite find, but it was sure to be nothing compared to

what lay beyond.

‘Same story,’ Andre advised, frustrated. ‘So what does the inscription read, in your opinion?’

I translated the signs saying there would be a curse on the man who would try to open the door and enter. Then: ‘A woman of Isis will come bearing bread in offering. Only to her will heaven’s door open.’

Andre was reading his notes and his eyes boggled a moment. ‘Go back to...a woman will come bearing. What did you say after that?’

‘Bread,’ I repeated. ‘Why?’

‘The local translators said it read *food*...are you sure?’

‘Sure I’m sure. I can’t believe an Egyptian could make a mistake like that, unless—’

‘They were purposefully trying to mislead us.’ Andre smiled grimly, as this is what he’d suspected all along.

‘Bread.’ I pondered the word’s significance. *The Bread of Life and Light*? I posed silently, having read about that just recently. ‘What happened to the white powder that they found here in the alchemist’s chamber early last century?’

Andre baulked at the question. ‘If you think it’s important, JC might know.’

‘Pardon?’

‘James Conally, archaeologist, the man in charge.’ Andre pointed down the road toward the campsite. ‘We can go see him now if you wish. He’ll be wanting to meet you anyway.’ When I nodded, Andre led off. ‘So why do you ask about the powder?’

‘Well, it is said to be one of the ingredients of the *Bread of Life*...’ The information startled Andre. ‘Or perhaps the bread itself?’

‘Of course!’ He hit himself on the head, obviously feeling he should have made the connection.

‘I’ve been reading something which suggests that this substance not only defies gravity, but when heated to extreme temperatures,’ I pointed to the blazing sun on the horizon, ‘it can send atoms into such a highward spin state that they vanish from this plane of existence altogether.’

Andre was smiling broadly now. ‘So what are you suggesting? That we coat the disc in this ancient mystical brew and hope that it disappears!’

I shrugged. 'If a culture could produce a substance that defies gravity, I'm sure they would have no problem whatsoever in reversing the process to produce your mysterious supermetal and rock.'

Andre nodded, smiling as if this was exactly what he'd expected of me. 'I'm willing to run with that theory, as it's better than any of the others we've had.'

'Why? What other theories have been put forward?' I was interested to know, in case I could see merit in them.

'Well, besides "blast it to hell", which didn't work,' Andre confessed, 'your theory is an island oasis in a rippleless sea of possibility. I knew you'd be an asset.'

In the many times I'd worked with Andre, this was the first time he'd actually appreciated my knowledge more than my physical presence. Admittedly, my outfit did little for my figure. 'One does one's best.'

James Conally was a pleasant bloke. He seemed well organised, courteous, knowledgeable and enthusiastic about anything that moved his project forward.

Needless to say, he greeted my theory with open arms, and praised Andre for bringing me to the project for I had already earned my week's pay.

'I wouldn't get that excited. I could be way off the mark.' I needed to speak to Albray, but from what he'd told Ashlee about the construction of the pyramids, I had a sneaking suspicion I'd be proven right. 'Our big problem is getting hold of this *shem*, manna, ORME!' Indeed, the substance had many names.

'Star-Fire.' Andre used a term that Albray had also used. 'The maker of kings and gods!'

'I have no idea what happened to the powder,' Conally advised me. 'My partner, Christian Molier, is the expert on the site. If anybody knows, he will. I'll contact him immediately.'

'Molier is not here?' I wondered why someone should be so interested as to fund the excavation and then settle for applying his expertise from afar.

Conally shook his head. 'My partner has a condition that does not allow him to be in sunlight, let alone desert heat.'

‘Oh, I see.’ I nodded in understanding.

‘But not to worry, we have the best in communications gear,’ Conally said cheerily. ‘I’ll have answers in no time. Meanwhile, I’m sure you could use some food and rest.’

The notion brought a large smile to my face.

‘They’re predicting sandstorms anyway, so best to stock up and batten down the hatches for as long as it lasts,’ he continued. ‘If the winds have passed by morning, then feel free to explore the Hathor complex.’

‘I will, don’t worry.’ He didn’t need to ask me twice if I wanted to be shown to my tent. I was weary from being on the move for over a day.

I was impressed by the campsite. We may have been in tents, but they were large and sturdy in order to survive a battering from the desert elements. As I was the only woman on the site, I got my own tent, which had a portaloos and also a self-contained shower recess—the base of the shower had sides high enough to be used for washing clothes, dishes, etc. I was also hooked up to the site’s power supply: I could run my computer, lights and an electric jug. A desk, a chair, a light and a bunk bed were supplied.

‘We’ve had worse accommodation,’ I commented to Andre, who smiled in agreement.

‘They’ve spared no expense to keep the team happy,’ he confirmed. ‘The mess tent is even air-conditioned! In the midday hours, not even the shade of this tent will offer much solace. The good news is that the food is excellent. Come,’ he motioned to the door, ‘try it out for yourself.’

I looked back to the bunk with a mournful groan of indecision.

‘I could have the cook bring something over?’ Andre let me off the hook.

‘Could you?’ I smiled in appreciation. ‘I really don’t think I’m up for a big social evening. Better to wait for when my brain is functioning again.’ I gave my eyes a rub.

‘No problem.’ Andre headed for the exit flap and then hesitated. ‘What about a small social evening?’

I served him a look indicating a negative answer. ‘I’m afraid I’ve met someone I’m rather taken with.’ I thought of Albray and grinned. I’d use him as an alibi to solve this little problem.

‘But your lover is not with you, so—’

‘I’m not like you, Andre.’ I shook my head and, thankfully, he conceded defeat.

‘If you change your mind...’

‘You’ll be the first to know,’ I assured him with a wave, and closed the tent flap behind him. ‘Ah...rest.’ I avoided my bed only long enough to use the loo, whereupon my weary body got familiar with my sleeping arrangement.

I awoke to find my tent doing a jig. The clattering of the metal supports stirred me from my slumber, but the base of the structure seemed to be holding up against the wind well enough. I rolled off my bed and crawled over to unzip the tent flap to see how bad the storm was—I didn’t even get a chance to look outside before my lap filled with sand. I quickly refastened the zip.

My stomach rumbled. I hadn’t stayed awake long enough to eat anything, and my eyes went to the desk to discover a tray of food had been delivered as I slept. ‘You really can be an angel at times, Andre.’

There were two large bottles of water, fresh bread, some white meat that tasted like chicken, a salad in a small sealed container, dried fruit, nuts and a small carton of long-life milk that was sitting in a little bowl of water, which might have been ice many hours ago.

It was daylight outside, thus it seemed apparent that I had slept through the afternoon and all night! Some light penetrated the tent, but due to the raging sandstorm it was barely enough to see my hand in front of me. I switched on my desk light to dig out my little electric jug, adapter, tea bags and sugar which travelled everywhere with me. I noted that Andre recalled my habit and sent along the milk.

While the kettle boiled, I opened my bags to get myself sorted out. ‘Now, what to do first?’ I gathered my wits and decided I needed Albray. I retrieved the stone from my pocket and summoned him forth.

What have you done? He flew into a rage the second he was present. *I should have known better than to come here with an amateur...didn’t you feel me trying to get your attention’!*

I was confused for a second. ‘Do you mean the itching?’

Albray rolled his eyes and nodded. *And now you have given the key to the enemy!*

‘The enemy?’ He’d lost me again. ‘Who is—’

Molier! he hollered over my query. *I should have known he’d be involved in this excavation.*

‘How could you know about Molier, when you’ve been dead for eight hundred years?’ I reasoned.

Do you want to guess who sealed my fate all those years ago? he challenged, the anger radiating from him.

I shook my head, able to think of only one answer, but it was impossible. ‘Christian Molier?’

Exactly right. Albray backed off to pace out his frustration.

‘I’m very sorry, Albray, but how was I supposed to know? Surely, you are mistaken about—’

Haven’t you read about Molier in Miss Granville’s journal yet?

‘No, I haven’t—’

You mean you haven’t even reached Paris yet?

I understood that he was talking about Paris in Ashlee’s tale. ‘I was disturbed just as Ashlee was fleeing Devere’s chateau for Paris.’

Then for god’s sake, read, Albray suggested, *so that you at least have some idea of who and what you’re dealing with.*

I really wasn’t used to being treated like an idiot and I wasn’t about to start appreciating it now. ‘Well, if you had just told me what the hell was going on when I asked you, then I would have known, wouldn’t I?’

Albray’s dark eyes shot back to me, but his rage calmed quickly to a more reasonable level. *Forgive me, Miss Montrose, it is not my intention to insult you. It is for your own protection that I recommend that you try to comprehend who and what you really are, and Ashlee is a far greater authority than I. That is why I beseech you to please read her account of the facts.*

‘All right,’ I agreed, being more disposed now that he’d moderated his tone of voice. ‘I shall read on.’

Thank you. Albray ventured a smile.

‘Would you like to stay while I read?’ I inquired politely, secretly hoping for a yes.

Albray nodded. *I have avenues I might investigate for our cause, if you would leave me at liberty in your world.*

‘And what is our cause, Albray?’

I suggest you read on and decide that for yourself. He eagerly awaited my permission to be at liberty.

‘But how do I know I can trust you at liberty if I am unaware of what business you are about?’ I was just teasing. I did trust him, because, beyond the little conversation I’d had with him, he never seemed to steer Ashlee wrong.

I’m afraid you’ll have to trust your instinct on that count, Albray replied.

He knew that I felt well disposed toward him. ‘I think it is very unfair that you should have telepathic access to my thoughts and emotions, and that I should not be awarded the same insight into you.’

No offence intended, Miss Montrose, he grinned, knowing his reply had cheek, *but if you strove to perfect your psychic skills you could know anything you desire about me.*

‘Did you mention that to Ashlee?’ I hadn’t read anything to that effect yet.

It didn’t take long for Miss Granville to discover it all on her own.

I hated the way Albray spoke with such admiration about her, when he obviously thought so little of me. ‘I understand that I must be a great disappointment to you.’ I couldn’t believe I was jealous of a dead woman and her relationship with this knight who’d been dead even longer!

‘On the contrary,’ Albray assured, ‘you are too smart for your own good...which is why you need to redefine your beliefs about the boundaries between fact and myth. Only then will you comprehend the events that are about to unfold in your life.’

I considered his words, which were not exactly as complimentary as I would have liked. I wanted him to flirt with me, as he had with Ashlee. Every other man with whom I came in contact admired me, so why not this man? ‘Feel free to be about your business,’ I granted, not wanting to bore him with my insecurities.

Just call if you need me and I shall return at once. He departed through the wall of my tent as I nodded.

‘It’s not like it matters whether he’s attracted to me or not.’ I struggled with my moodiness, but it was really depressing to consider that the most desirable man I’d ever met had been dead for eight hundred years. I dug out Ashlee’s huge journal and found the key to open it on my key ring. ‘Come

on, Ashlee. Share your insights so that I might understand what the hell our friend is so worried about.'

I opened to the page marked by a gold ribbon attached to the middle of the upper spine of the huge volume and noted that I was about a quarter of the way into the tale. I was tempted to turn to the last chapter and cut to the chase, but how much would I miss learning about Albray if I did? 'Just continue where you left off,' I lectured, not wanting to waste time debating the issue with myself. 'Now, where was I?' I scanned down the page and found my place...

—my heart was shattered by my failed romance, but also exulting to be on the run, free of everyone and everything that had ever held authority over me.

Next there was a break in the text and a special note that read: *From this point on, the section of this tale that involves Mr Devere was copied from the Honeymoon journal of my dear friend, the Countess of Oxford, Lady Susan Devere. Eyewitnesses confirm that her contribution to this journal is a truthful and accurate account of events.*

LESSON 9

ENLIGHTENMENT

FROM THE HONEYMOON JOURNAL OF LADY SUSAN DEVERE

No one noticed Ashlee's absence until early afternoon the next day.

Mr Devere's manservant, Mr Tibbs, who had been instructed not to disturb his lord in the morning, ventured into his lord's quarters later that day to find his new mistress and all her belongings gone and his lordship in such a fit of sleep that he could not be woken.

I dared say nothing of what I'd seen late last night.

The house steward informed Mr Tibbs that Mrs Devere's maid had told him that Mrs Devere was planning a surprise for her husband and had borrowed a coach to take to town and make arrangements.

This prevented the alarm being raised until evening, but when Ashlee did not return and Mr Devere did not wake, my husband and brother began to feel uneasy.

Ashlee hadn't mentioned anything about poisoning her husband before departing, and I couldn't help but wonder what she'd done to make him sleep as he did. We fetched a physician to look at Mr Devere, and the diagnosis was that he was in fine health. No poison, nor a blow to the body, had caused his fit of sleep; as long as he awoke within the next few days, my brother-in-law would be none the worse for the rest.

This was quite true of Mr Devere's physical condition, but when he did finally awake on the morning of our third day at the chateau, his emotional and mental condition were not so stable.

My husband was with his brother when he awoke. I was waiting in the adjoining boudoir, hoping to obtain some clue as to why Ashlee had fled in secrecy.

'No!' I heard the cry of loss ring out. In fact, I suspected the whole household had heard it. The pain was so heartfelt that I couldn't help but

feel for the man. ‘God no, don’t let her have jumped to the wrong conclusion.’

Then, everything went quiet. I crept up to the door and placed my ear against it. I heard the sound of ripping paper and there was silence for a moment. Earnest suppressed a groan of despair.

‘What does it say?’ my husband beseeched his brother, and I assumed they’d found Ashlee’s letter.

‘She’s left me everything and fled,’ Earnest summed up, mournfully.

‘I am sorry, Earnest. I told you from the start that she would be trouble. Still, at least your marriage wasn’t a total loss. You’re a landowner now and —’

‘You don’t understand! I have to go after her,’ Mr Devere insisted. ‘I cannot lose her. My life won’t be worth living.’

Then came a great thud.

‘Clearly, you’re not well enough to go anywhere.’ The strain in my husband’s voice seemed to indicate that his brother had collapsed and Lord Devere was struggling to aid him to his feet.

‘I just need some food,’ Mr Devere insisted. ‘Tell me, where is my sister-in-law this morning?’

‘My countess is in the next room, waiting for word about your condition,’ Lord Devere informed him.

I smiled. I liked being *his* countess.

‘How much does she know about my wife’s disappearance?’ Mr Devere lowered his voice and I barely heard the question.

‘No more than the rest of us, I should think,’ my husband replied honestly. ‘My wife has been in my company a good deal, as you know, and was just as surprised as the rest of us when our sister-in-law went missing and you slept on unaware for two days.’

‘Two days!’

I heard the rustle of paper once more, then footsteps coming toward the door.

‘Where are you going half dressed?’ my husband queried his brother.

I tiptoed backwards to quickly collapse into a chair and try to look composed.

I gasped when Mr Devere emerged from the bedroom naked to the waist, clutching a shirt in one hand and an envelope and letter in the other.

Still, being a woman of the world myself now, I suppressed my shock and made nothing of his impropriety.

‘Earnest!’ my lord objected. ‘I really must insist that you dress yourself before addressing my wife.’

‘What is this?’ Mr Devere passed one page of the letter to me and dressed his upper body to appease his brother as I read it.

‘It reads like a sleeping spell, doesn’t it?’

‘Is it a spell?’ he demanded to know.

‘I do not believe in such things, Mr Devere. I would say it is just a coincidence.’ I gave my view calmly. ‘Perhaps if I could read Ashlee’s letter—’

‘No,’ he snapped and then regretted making his reluctance so obvious. ‘It is very personal.’

I suspected from what Ashlee had told me that it was not sentiment that prevented him from handing the letter over, but some information more incriminating. ‘Really?’ I became rather indignant, and I stood. ‘Well, if you have finished interrogating me, I have a couple of questions for you... for instance, why my dear friend should feel the need to pack up and flee this house in the middle of the night!’ I was furious to have lost my best friend this way and I wasn’t afraid to show it.

Mr Devere went very pale suddenly. ‘I know how circumstances appear, but I assure you that in no way have I abused my relationship with my wife.’

‘Then perhaps you could supply a more agreeable explanation.’ I handed him back the spell, recalling that Ashlee had also insisted that Earnest had not physically abused her.

Earnest’s gaze met my own suddenly. ‘You were the last to see her.’ There was no accusation in his voice. He knew the truth of it and I glanced down to notice how his fingertips caressed the page I’d just been holding.

It seems that intimate relations have a strengthening effect on my talents, Ashlee had said, when I’d spied her levitating luggage the night of her departure. What if intimate relations had sparked psychic talent in her husband as well?

I didn’t know how much my husband knew about Ashlee’s secret, but I felt fairly sure he would not be comfortable with the sensual nature of this supernatural subject matter.

‘Could I speak with you privately about my wife?’ Mr Devere requested, as if he’d read my mind and wished to spare me any trouble with his brother. ‘After all, you know her better than anyone.’

My husband looked at me, appearing concerned that he was to be left out of the conversation. ‘Were you the last one to see our sister?’ he asked.

I needed to clear the air with Mr Devere now, and so I confessed. ‘Ashlee made me promise not to say anything and allow her time to escape.’

My husband was clearly hurt that I’d kept the information from him. ‘Escape...from what?’ He wanted to know what was so unpleasant about his house and hospitality.

‘That is precisely what I wish to know.’ I looked back to Mr Devere.

He looked at Lord Devere, silently appealing to him to withdraw, although he said nothing.

‘I see.’ My lord accepted that his brother would not speak in his presence. ‘I’ll be downstairs, should anybody need me.’ Lord Devere closed the door on his way out.

‘Now, explain yourself.’ I looked at my brother-in-law as he collapsed into a chair. ‘My dearest friend has fled god knows where, and now I am at odds with my husband. I would like to know why.’

Mr Devere sat with his face in his hands for a moment, and as he looked up he tried to brush away his tears. ‘It is because I made a mistake... so grand and life-consuming that I cannot see how I shall ever correct it.’ The tears continued to flow in a constant stream down his cheek, but his voice was calm and unwavering. ‘I’ve never known fear before today.’

‘What are you afraid of?’ I took the chair opposite Mr Devere, now more concerned than angry.

‘That I’ll lose her.’ His voice wavered and he cleared his throat. ‘I am afraid of what is happening to me.’ He looked into my eyes, hoping I might be aware of his inference.

‘Ashlee’s talent has rubbed off on you...as it were.’ I tipped my head and repressed the urge to smile at my boldness—I was pleased to see my brother grin briefly, too.

‘So much power.’ He held out his hands so I could see plainly how they trembled. ‘I see things, hear things, feel things that I’ve never conceived of before! I felt so alive in my wife’s company and, without her,

my newfound awareness will fade and I shall return to the shadow that I was. Your best friend is my addiction and now she is gone...do you see why I fear?’

‘But is it Ashlee, or the power she gives you that you are in love with?’ I was still undecided as to what course of action I should take. Obviously, Mr Devere would go after his wife, but would I aid him to find her? That depended on how truthful he was prepared to be.

Devere shook his head, perplexed by the question. ‘I was told I’d marry her when I was twelve years old. I’ve been training ever since, so that I might be worthy of her, able to protect her, please her. My whole world has revolved around her. Is my devotion voluntary...yes! Could I ever love anyone else...*no!* Am I in love with her? Well, you tell me.’

I was flabbergasted by the confession, but I regained my wits swiftly enough to fulfil my lust for detail. ‘Who told you about ‘Ashlee and who trained you?’

‘It was the Dowager Countess Lady Charlotte Cavandish who told me of my destiny and introduced me to the secret brotherhood which guards the bloodline of the Star-Fire Kings.’

‘And Ashlee is part of this bloodline?’ I was totally intrigued.

‘We all are: Devere, Cavandish, Granville, Hamilton and many other highly placed families, yet my wife’s is the strongest female line. With the rest of the bloodlines, and there are many, the way to tell if the sacred blood is strong in the individual is a birthmark.’ Mr Devere revealed to me the red cross on his chest.

I recognised it at once. Ashlee has one—’

‘On her back,’ Earnest concluded with me. ‘And I’ll bet Lady Charlotte has one too.’

‘Well...if my family is part of this bloodline, then why are my father and brother not members of this brotherhood?’

‘Ah...but they are!’ Earnest enlightened me. ‘Why do you think they have been so protective of Miss Granville? In fact, your aunt was the first woman to be admitted to the Scottish chapter.’

‘And my husband too?’

Mr Devere shook his head. ‘No, James never had the aptitude for the brotherhood. He was a good god-fearing lad bound for the House of Lords. You know how he is with anything supernatural...the brotherhood would

have just confused the issue for him, and this was plain to my order. So, they bypassed him, for I bore the mark and he did not. And I was chosen to wed the most promising daughter of the bloodline yet. Conveniently, I was just a second son, who could serve the bloodline for mating purposes. By wedding Miss Granville, the large family estates and titles would pass to our heir.'

I sat and digested the information, then asked, 'And the name of this brotherhood?'

Mr Devere served me a challenging look. 'If they find out I have lost their prized *daughter* and her favour, I am a dead man. I don't need to break any more of my vows to the chapter.'

I rolled my eyes, thinking he was exaggerating.

'You think Hereford's death was an accident?'

There was a brief explosion of shock inside my being.

'That was my big mistake.' Devere came to the point. 'I thought I was on the side of the righteous. I never thought they'd kill Hereford! I had always intended to tell Miss Granville *everything*, but when she pinpointed the Grand Master of my chapter as having threatened Hereford the day before he died, I was forced to lie to my wife about my association with the brotherhood. Now she has found me out.'

He handed me Ashlee's letter, having told me the worst of it. 'What does this brotherhood want with Ashlee?'

Devere took a deep breath and shrugged. 'I am not in the higher echelons. I cannot pretend to know the extent of their aspirations. But this much I do know: it is only the females of the bloodline who carry what is termed the Gene of Isis.'

'Genesis?' I noted the play on words. Devere nodded to confirm an association.

'This legacy passes to the female's sons and daughters, and can be activated in the males of the line by coupling him with a female of the blood, or by feeding him an alchemical substance known as Fire-Stone.'

'So your mother must have been a female of the line, and you must be one of the Star-Fire princes?' I referred to his new psychic talent as proof.

'So it would seem.' He almost sounded like he regretted it now. 'I am told that this is the first time in centuries that a marriage has taken place between two descendants who bear the mark.' He hung his head. 'I fear it is

our offspring who will be of greater interest to the High Grand Masters of the order.'

'They are trying to breed some kind of superbeing,' I realised. 'For what end?'

'I don't know.' Devere was annoyed at having to concede ignorance. 'However, if I am not an integral part of Ashlee Granville's life, then I shall be shut out altogether and made to disappear. The brothers will go on manipulating her life, as they always have, and she will be none the wiser.'

'Oh, I think she is wiser now.' I gave Ashlee her due. 'As you have discovered, it is very difficult to keep anything from Ashlee—and, to date, she has been repressing her ability. Now that she is free to do as she pleases, it's going to be a lot harder to mislead her. And they'll have to find her.'

'Oh, they will find her,' Devere assured me. 'The brothers are widespread from Scotland to Egypt, from Ireland to India, and everywhere in between.'

'If we don't tell anyone she's missing,' I suggested forcefully, 'then how shall the brotherhood know? Especially if we send correspondence home that indicates she is still with us.'

'That would allow us a little more time,' Devere conceded. 'If you would aid me to employ these new skills of mine to find my wife, then perhaps all is not lost,' he appealed, his eyes so like my beloved's, although a paler shade of blue.

'I will help you,' I said, not yet convinced his intentions were as pure as he claimed. 'Only, if you are lying to me now, Ashlee will see through you at a glance and I will be happy to have her deal with you and your brotherhood in any way she sees fit!' This was a threat, and no feeble one at that. 'If what you are saying is true, then Ashlee needs to know the whole of it. And as her friend, it is my duty to find her.'

Real or faked, my brother-in-law was very relieved at my decision. 'Thank you.' His gratitude was heartfelt and emphatic. 'Do you know where my wife was headed?'

I realised he'd just been waiting to get me on side before springing that question. 'I have no idea, she didn't say,' I told him truthfully and perhaps a little harshly, for the truth obviously crushed him. 'But my guess is that she'll head deeper into Europe.' I tried to be encouraging. 'Paris is the next major stepping stone from here, so that should be our first stop.'

‘Our first stop?’ Devere actually flashed a fleeting shadow of a smile. ‘You mean to imply that you plan to join me on this fool’s crusade?’

‘Well, I can’t be of much use to you if I stay here.’ Yes, it was insane, but suddenly the idea of not knowing what I’d be doing tomorrow or where I’d be had great appeal.

‘James will never allow you to travel with me, *alone*, through Europe.’

‘Then we will just have to convince your dear brother that it is his duty to help us find our lost sister.’ I served Mr Devere with a wink. ‘But my brother’s political agenda—’ I held up a finger to hush his concern. ‘Just leave my Lord Oxford to me.’

FROM THE TRAVEL JOURNALS OF MRS ASHLEE DEVERE

Post-revolution Paris was my kind of town. In the vacuum of Napoleon’s departure, the city had become a hive of artists, writers, theologians and radical thinkers. If you spoke decent French, and it was commented that I did, the Parisians were very helpful and to the point.

This city may not yet have been as organised and developed as London—many of the streets were covered in a black muck that was a mixture of human and animal waste and mud—but construction had started on several very ambitious new landmarks, in addition to a gaslight system for the city streets. A grand art gallery, the Louvre, was nearly completed and already hosted many exhibitions and fine works of art. At one end of a wide dirt road in the city, a construction site marked the unfinished Arc de Triomphe. The growing city also boasted its first railway line, between Paris and St Germain. There were some very fine tea and coffee houses, which proved to be excellent centres for obtaining information.

In social situations, Nanny Beat conveniently transformed into my mama, but as she was not confident with conversing with her betters—and quite often didn’t understand them anyway—she developed a hearing problem. This gave her cause to speak coarsely, or to ignore people when the need arose.

In one sitting of afternoon tea we learned of some excellent accommodation, and when it became known that I spoke and read several different languages, I was told that the chief librarian of the Arsenal Library in Paris was looking for translators at present.

The Arsenal was a major depository for mediaeval occult manuscripts: an extensive collection of magical, cabalistic, Cathar and hermetic disciplines. More recently the library had taken charge of all the books and manuscripts that Napoleon had confiscated from the Vatican and many other monasteries around Europe. There were more than three thousand cases of material that were being translated at present. Apparently Rome was negotiating for the return of some of these texts to the Vatican, and a group of library staff were soon to embark on a journey to the Holy City.

Travelling by land was probably the most direct route to my destination: the longer land route down through Italy to Sicily would make for a short sea voyage and, due to pirates in the Mediterranean, less risky than any alternative routes. Perhaps I could arrange to travel with the library's party at least as far as Geneva. There I could brave the trek through the mountains and the cold of Switzerland and on to Venice, where I could catch a boat down through the Adriatic Sea and across the Mediterranean to Cairo. An alternative was to continue south through France to Marseilles and take the extended sea voyage via Sardinia and Malta.

It seemed like too great a coincidence to let pass without investigation. What's more, how could I forgo a peek into such a library to drool over all the texts that my schedule would not allow me time to read? Perhaps I might be able to come back here one day, but who could say? That was the most wonderful thing about my present life; I couldn't really see beyond the moment and I liked this constant being in the now.

Our terrace accommodation backed onto a lovely courtyard shared with several other terraces, all of which had their own table for taking tea in the sunny private area. The central feature of the court was a beautiful little tree surrounded by a colourful bed of flowers—trees in Paris were few and far between. We were a good enough distance away from the manure stench of the well-trodden thoroughfares, but a short walk down a paved street took us to the heart of Paris.

Nanny was concerned about how I planned to pay for our comfortable accommodation, so I confided in her regarding my secret treasure and she nearly had a fit!

'You can't keep such riches in something so easily lost or stolen,' she insisted in a whisper, as she looked over the red book.

'Then how should I transport it? I have no pockets.'

‘The very thing!’ Nanny clapped her hands. ‘You leave it to me.’ She winked at me confidently.

The next day Nanny headed off to go shopping, and I caught a carriage to the Arsenal Library.

The library was a very imposing, two-storey, L-shaped structure. My carriage drove into the courtyard and I alighted at the door, which was positioned in between the two wings that angled back toward the street on either side of me.

Inside, I inquired after the chief librarian, whose name I had foolishly failed to learn. I was told to wait by one of the several gentlemen librarians. I couldn’t see a woman in the place and yet there was nothing to indicate that the library was for men only.

A short while later, a middle-aged, dark-haired Frenchman introduced himself to me as the assistant to the chief librarian. ‘My name is Mr Jenkins, Mrs Devere. I hear you are a translator, interested in our Vatican archives.’

‘That is very true, Monsieur Jenkins,’ I responded in French. ‘I also wanted to inquire about a journey to Rome that some of your colleagues are embarking on in the near future. Mama and I also wish to make this trip, but as we have no trusted male company to accompany us, we wondered if—’

‘Why, yes, of course.’ He was quick to allay any doubt that we would not be welcome in the party, and did not bother asking after my husband. I was fast discovering that the French were more liberal in their views than the English. ‘I am so very sorry that our curator is elsewhere today,’ Jenkins said. ‘I feel sure he’ll wish to meet you.’

Why did it seem like my reputation had preceded me? ‘Really? Why do you say that, for I am no one of consequence?’

‘Well,’ Jenkins paused to smile, or perhaps to think, ‘it is so seldom a sister takes an interest in our work, especially an English woman.’

He made me smile, for I was not surprised to hear this. ‘Is my French very ill spoken?’

‘Not at all,’ he assured me. ‘It is your countenance that gives your origin away.’

‘You are too kind,’ I replied, sensing both compliment and derision in his statement.

He had a lovely aura though; not extraordinary, but showing a good person. There were little muddy patches around his third eye and gut, which I translated as meaning that he was fighting his instinct about something, and that he had some major concern with processing higher knowledge. Then again, it could add up to a suggestion that his imagination was a little stifled. Mr Jenkins presented as a scholar, but he lacked the individualistic air of an artist.

‘If it pleases you, Madame, I can show you to the archive room.’ He gestured to the door that led to the grand foyer. ‘No one is in there today, but you are most welcome to have a poke about.’

My heart started beating nineteen to the dozen. What an opportunity. And for a woman at that! ‘It would be a wonderful opportunity. Thank you, Mr Jenkins.’

‘Right this way.’ He led off. ‘How many languages do you speak, Mrs Devere?’

‘Six,’ I stated plainly, trying not to sound boastful. ‘And a little Hebrew.’

‘Then you ought to fare well. You are required to sign our guest book and give a contact address in Paris for security reasons. We couldn’t have any of our archives going missing without knowing where to start looking, now could we?’ Mr Jenkins said as we headed into another wing of the building.

‘Not a problem,’ I replied.

‘Our curator could return today, but if he misses you, can I arrange an appointment for tomorrow?’

‘I would be most grateful if you would.’ I was about to ask the curator’s name but I was distracted when double doors were parted before me.

It was a huge room we entered, with tall windows along one wall. Around the other walls were shelves piled high with old books, manuscripts, scrolls and parchments. More of the same covered the desks, of which there were many. There were several glass cabinets with sheets of crumbling parchment presented for viewing and translation.

‘These texts are under glass for good reasons, but you are free to handle everything else. There are paper and pens aplenty lying about, so if

you desire to jot anything down, please do so,' Jenkins concluded, appearing eager to depart. 'Could I have some tea brought to you?'

I smiled gratefully. 'That really would be spoiling me, Mr Jenkins.'

'Then I shall see that it is done, Madame. Good day.' He bowed and left me in the middle of a historian's paradise.

'What to read first?' My head was swimming as I considered the choice. I looked at the open book on a desk beside me. It was a Latin translation of *The Works of Saint Ignatius of Antioch*. The book was open at a copy of a letter written by Bishop Clement of Alexandria to a friend, which dated the letter to about the year 200AD. The bishop was talking about the Gospel of Mark, or part thereof, that was to be suppressed because it did not conform to the church's teachings.

For even if they should say something true, one who loves the Truth should not, even so, agree with them.

For not all the true things are the Truth, nor should that Truth which seems true according to human opinions, be preferred to the true Truth—that according to the faith.

To them one must never give way; nor when they put forward their falsifications, should no one concede that the secret gospel is by Mark—but should deny it on oath. For not all true things are to be said to all men.

'The secret gospel of Mark?' I looked around at the masses of texts and laughed at my chances of finding the document.

A knock at the door announced that my tea had arrived. It was wheeled in by an elderly lady who set it down on a small table that was free of paperwork and books.

I thanked her kindly, to which she gave a curtsey and a 'Madame' and departed silently with her trolley, closing the door again.

I did fancy a cup of tea, and it would allow me time to ponder which text would serve me best to read.

I poured my tea, and with my first sip the solution came to me—an itch on my left palm. 'Albray, Albray, Albray.'

An interesting predicament. The knight took a seat on the other chair at my table.

‘And what do you suggest?’ I sipped at my tea, a particularly good brew.

You wish to define which text destiny has brought you here to read. Why not use your new talent to will this text to you? Psychokinesis can be used for much more than just moving things about. This talent includes the ability to rearrange the atomic structure of any given thing. On your plane of existence, that is, he thought to add.

I balked at his words.

Best that we just start with the book, he encouraged, realising that he’d unnerved me.

‘I cannot change atomic structure by accident, I hope.’

Of course not. Albray didn’t sound entirely confident about that. *I’m sure no harm will come of it.*

‘All right then.’ I placed my cup aside, and wiped my sweaty palms on my napkin.

I took a moment to still my mind and calm my heart, then stated my will in my mind.

Nothing seemed to come of it, but then I turned to see a paper trail of parchments floating my way and as a piece alighted on my lap it crumbled to dust. ‘Oh, Jesus, Albray, it must have come forth from one of the glass cases!’

A knock at the door set my heart racing and a hot flush filled my cheeks.

Mr Jenkins entered. ‘Mrs Devere. How would two o’clock tomorrow suit?’

Thankfully, he waited by the door for my response. ‘That would suit very well, Mr Jenkins, thank you.’ Before I’d drawn breath he was gone again.

‘Albray, what do I do?’ I panicked as the priceless document transformed to dirt all over my frock.

What do you think changing the atomic structure of an object means? He rolled his eyes as I stared at him blankly. *Just will it back together...will it to be as strong as hemp,* he suggested.

My intent manifested as Albray had anticipated and I began to breathe easily once more. ‘Sorry.’ I apologised for my little fit. ‘That was very scary.’

I *understand*, he confirmed, feeling all my emotional turmoil.

‘Now what is this?’ I had the courage to take the sheet in hand.

It was an account from a bishop in Northern France to Pope Honorius the First and it told of a strange incident.

In the year 633AD a mysterious little boat sailed into Boulogne-sur-mer harbour. No person was on board the vessel, but it carried a statue of the Black Madonna and child, accompanied by several manuscripts. The bishop regretted to inform the Pope that the local authorities were unwilling to hand the statue, or the texts, into church custody. However, the bishop had been given the opportunity to translate some of the manuscripts. The bishop’s translation read as follows:

This is a truthful account of my life, yet to history I shall be as myth. All account of my days will vanish or be distorted to suit my oppressors—to whom women are valued below animals. It is my belief that if I am remembered at all, it will be as a whore and not as a Nazarite priestess, who was a wife and mother to the royal Kings of Judah.

‘Oh, my god,’ I gasped, ‘surely this could not be what I think it is?’ I searched through the other parchments which had floated into my lap to find the end of the account and here the bishop noted, for the Pope’s information, that the manuscript had been signed MM.

‘Mary Magdalene,’ I dared to guess, and Albray nodded, having come to the same conclusion.

You should find her tale most inspiring. ‘Indeed!’ I read on.

I departed the library in a complete daze. So many things that I had always suspected had been confirmed, along with several other mind-boggling revelations about the life and character of Jesus Christ, King of the Jews. In fact, the account was so radical that I began to question the validity of the document.

Perhaps it is just a fantastic work of fiction, I suggested to myself, but Albray was still at liberty and keeping pace with me.

I don't believe so, he said. For, if it were not true, everything my order stands for and believes in would be a farce. Moreover, you know in your heart that no bishop of that time would dare fabricate such a lie to the Pope!

I needed the privacy of a carriage for this conversation and I flagged down a transport easily enough.

No sooner had the door of the carriage closed than I allowed my thoughts to come flooding out. 'Are you trying to tell me that Jesus Christ did not die on the Cross, but was instead rescued by a radical Judaic revolutionary who was supposed to be crucified on the same day?'

Yes. Barabbas, who aided in carrying Jesus' Cross to the crucifixion site, swapped places with Simon Zealot who was also to be crucified that day as a thief...although he was, in truth, a rebel and a High Priest of the Hellenistic Order, as was Jesus eventually. Simon was opposed to the segregated ways of the Jewish elders, a governing body known as the Sanhedrin. Both Simon Zealot and Jesus believed that a segregated Jewish nation would never defeat the might of Rome. But unlike John the Baptist and Jesus' older brother, James, who were more disposed toward the more conservative Hebrews, the revolutionary Zealots knew the Jews could not succeed in their mission if they continued to hold themselves separate from the Gentiles.

'Native non-Jews,' I stated, and Albray nodded.

The Sanhedrin council didn't appreciate having their personal dealings with Rome disrupted by revolution. The Sanhedrin had Jesus arrested, but as it was forbidden for the council to sit during the Passover, the responsibility of trying Jesus was handed over to Pontius Pilate.

'But, according to the manuscript I just read, Pilate did all within his power to see to it that Jesus didn't die on the Cross. In fact, Pilate had his guard assist with the escape from the crypt.'

True, for Pilate had his own agenda. He had struck a deal with Herod-Antipas of Galilee where Pilate promised to see to the release of Jesus—it suited Herod-Antipas for Jesus to continue his campaign and provoke King Herod-Agrippa. However, to be hailed as the long-awaited Messiah, Jesus had to live up to biblical prophecy which stated that the Messiah would be a descendant of the House of David, which Jesus was; that he would be a revolutionary thinker, and as Jesus preached that the way to god was

through service to others and the power of one, his was definitely a new way of thought . . . or at least a very old one that had not stirred in some time; and the third requirement of the Messiah was that he would have his blood drawn by his own people.

‘And the crucifixion achieved this. I understand all that,’ I said, feeling a little woozy—too much startling information too soon was obviously not a good thing. ‘But how could the church have suppressed the knowledge that Jesus was married to Mary Magdalene and that she was actually three months pregnant at the time of the crucifixion! She claimed in the manuscript that they had three children, all born in France.’

The eldest of which was a daughter, Tamar, from whom you are descended.

LESSON 10

PHANTASMS

FROM THE HONEYMOON JOURNAL OF LADY SUSAN DEVERE

Today we reached Paris.

It wasn't easy to recruit Lord Devere to our mission, but I did. My husband loves me very much and I am a little ashamed of how I use that to advantage, but I strongly feel that we do have an obligation to find our dear sister.

My brother, Simon, volunteered to remain at the Chateau de Vere, with Catherine, and would send on any correspondence.

Our first stop in Paris was the Arsenal Library, not only because the literature stored there would be a magnet for Ashlee, but also because Mr Devere said he had acquaintances there. I assumed this to mean others of his brotherhood. I entered the L-shaped building with my eyes and mind wide open. Poor Lord Devere, however, was most bemused.

'I think it's shameful, when we are in one of the most exciting cities in Europe, that the first place we visit is an esoteric library.' Obviously my earl was concerned about even being seen here.

'Why don't you go and secure rooms in a good hotel, and you can send the carriage back to collect us?' Whilst giving him an excuse to leave, I made it clear that I intended to stay.

'You don't have to stay.' Mr Devere unwittingly threw a spanner in the works.

'Quite right,' my husband agreed, eyeing the all-male attendants in the library. 'This hardly seems a suitable place for a lady.'

I took a step backward to state my position. 'I am in Paris to find my dear friend, and I shall go, *and be seen*, anywhere that my dear sister's trail may lead me.' I think they both got the message rather clearly.

'I shall see to the accommodation.' Lord Devere ventured forward to kiss my cheek and promptly left the building.

‘You don’t trust me, dear sister?’ Mr Devere asked, as he seated himself to await word of an audience with his colleague, having secured a gentleman at the front desk to see to his request.

‘You haven’t earned my trust, Mr Devere,’ I stated. ‘Let us see how our journey progresses, shall we?’

The gentleman from the front desk returned and we were asked to follow him to the curator’s office. ‘Don’t mind the drawn blinds. Mr Molier has a skin condition that is very sensitive to sunlight, hence the gas lighting.’

Mr Devere glanced sideways at me, as if saying this was news to him—he’d obviously never met this colleague of his. I was a bit apprehensive and I hoped this person was not going to be hideously deformed or something. I could not have been more wrong.

Mr Molier was a very handsome man, although his skin was so pale white and glowing that it almost appeared blue. This seemed very odd, as the long curls of his hair were dark, as were his eyes. Despite his skin condition he appeared a very fit fellow.

‘Mr Devere, at last we meet.’ Molier came out from behind his desk to shake my brother-in-law’s hand. ‘I’m sorry it couldn’t be under better circumstances. You’ve misplaced your wife, I hear?’

Devere was as shocked as I was.

‘How did you know?’ he spluttered, and then added more hopefully as he figured out the answer for himself: ‘You’ve found her?’

I breathed a sigh of relief when Molier nodded. One, we’d found Ashlee; and two, Devere had not broken our agreement to keep Ashlee’s disappearance a secret.

‘She should be arriving very shortly, in fact.’

‘That is a great relief,’ Devere confided, and then felt he should explain the situation. ‘There was a misunderstanding—’

‘I see that much has changed about you recently, Mr Devere.’ Molier grinned, as if he knew everything and more.

Was Molier psychic too? I think Mr Devere was wondering the same thing. My brother remembered his manners when Mr Molier looked my way.

‘Allow me to present my sister-in-law, Lady Oxford.’

‘It is a rare pleasure indeed to meet another female of Cavandish blood. Your aunt was very well respected here.’

Molier kissed my hand before I could prevent it, and the way his eyes stayed glued to mine as he did so made me feel uneasy.

With a knock on the door, a gentleman entered. ‘Mrs Devere is here, sir, but as she asked to view the archives again, I took her there to await you.’

‘Thank you, Jenkins.’ Molier dismissed the librarian. ‘I must ask you both to stay here,’ he said. ‘In all fairness to Mrs Devere, I should speak with her alone before I bring her forth for this reunion.’

Devere was clearly worried Ashlee would flee again. ‘But she will not —’

‘I understand your concerns. *Truly.*’ Molier was mysterious and convincing. ‘Please trust me.’

FROM THE TRAVEL JOURNALS OF MRS ASHLEE DEVERE

I was looking a little plumper today, as Nanny had made a special corset with several pockets that were padded each side. Our treasure was cushioned between the padding. Nanny felt that, since I was such a skinny thing, the corset gave me a healthier appearance. I had stuffed the precious Star vial in between my breasts, and as I wore a very modest gown I had no fear of the vial coming loose or being spotted.

All the blinds in the library were closed today, but lanterns and candles were lit for my benefit. I wondered why Jenkins had not drawn back the blinds, but perhaps too much daylight wasn’t good for the old scripts.

Once we were alone, Albray joked about Nanny’s solution to our security problem. *Do you feel like a million gold francs?*

I didn’t feel his jesting warranted a response.

So, what would you like to destroy today?

‘I told you this morning, and last night, I’d like to try and verify what I read yesterday.’ I was startled by a tap on my shoulder. I was looking at Albray so I quickly turned and was confronted by a floating scroll. ‘Oh my.’ I was shocked that my will could be so powerful. ‘I didn’t even do a summons!’ I took the item in hand and then spotted a multitude of documents all floating in the air, waiting to be beckoned.

Thou art a true Master. Albray flattered me graciously. *There seems to be a bit more here than we have time for today. However, it seems you can rest assured that the account you read yesterday can be verified.* He enjoyed making light of my disbelief, being such a strong believer himself. *Why are you so bothered by the fact that you are a descendant of Jesus, when you now know he was a very great, very enlightened man?*

‘I’m sure I won’t have a problem with it once I separate the man from the institution in my mind.’ I’d spent so long blaming Jesus for the disgrace that was his church, it was hard to fathom that, not only had the church not been Jesus’ doing, his bloodline had been repressed by the very church devoted to him. ‘Is that what has you so cheerful today, Albray? All the explaining you don’t have to do?’

No. He shook his head, still smiling. *Keeping your company each day brings its own rewards.*

Was he flirting with me? He had ceased trying to charm me the day I married, but I guess he figured that now I’d left Devere, I was fair game again.

‘I was interested to note in the manuscript yesterday,’ I decided to sidestep the issue, ‘that after being excommunicated by the Sanhedrin, Jesus’ older brother, James, took the name Joseph ha Rama Theo...Joseph of Arimathea, do you think?’

Albray applauded. *He eventually settled in England.*

One of the doors opened and all the floating texts ceased to defy gravity and dropped to the floor. Fortunately, the man who entered was wearing a large hood over his face, and did not see the cause of the thud that preceded his entrance.

He removed his head covering after closing the door. ‘Bonjour, Mrs Devere.’

No, it can’t be. Albray was extremely alarmed.

‘I am Christian Molier, curator of this collection.’ The pale handsome man came forward to make my acquaintance, and Albray’s reaction made it very difficult for me to keep my focus on Molier. ‘I apologise for the unusual daytime lighting arrangement, but my skin is very sensitive to sunlight.’

You’re an abomination, Molier, Albray harshly accused, although only I could hear him and he was making me nervous. *Hereford must have*

released you from your imprisonment.

‘That’s quite all right, Mr Molier. It was very good of you to go to such pains to meet with me.’ I allowed him to kiss my hand, noting that his light-body was very strange to perceive. His aura sparkled golden, whilst his chakra centres were bogged with darkness. I had to agree with Albray; Molier was an abomination of some kind.

You must leave, Ashlee, Albray insisted very passionately. This man is a vampire and he is after your blood.

Albray’s panic was not very conducive to my concentration.

‘How can I help you, Mrs Devere?’

‘Well, actually, as it turns out...I no longer require your assistance, but I did wish to thank you and Mr Jenkins for your time. It was greatly appreciated.’ I placed aside the scroll in my hand, curtsied and made to leave.

‘Ah, Mrs Devere...’

Molier pulled me up and I hid my misgivings. What could he do that I could not defend myself against? I turned back to him.

‘I have something in my office that I would like to give you, but I forgot to bring it down.’ Molier sounded annoyed at himself for the oversight. ‘Would you be so kind as to wait here while I fetch it?’

What is it you have for me? I honed in on his thoughts and upon capturing a brief glimpse of Mr Devere, my inner panic returned. ‘Of course.’ I took a seat so as not to look in a hurry. ‘That will give me more time to peruse the texts in your wonderful archive.’

‘Indeed,’ he granted. ‘I won’t detain you long.’

‘I have no pressing engagements,’ I assured him.

I was relieved when the door closed behind Molier, until I heard the key turn in the lock. I rushed to the door to confirm my worst fears, and heard Molier instruct Jenkins to see to it that no one unlocked the door until he returned.

Jenkins did not question the instruction.

‘Molier has Devere in this very building!’ I stressed my concern to Albray in a whisper, even though he was already aware of what I knew. ‘This is probably secret brotherhood headquarters! What am I to do, Albray?’

I was gripping my amulet so tightly that I picked up on Albray's mind to voice the suggestion at the same time as he did. 'The windows!' We both rushed to the other side of the room.

It didn't take long to realise that we needed a key. 'Security measures, no doubt,' I was beginning to think the situation was hopeless, and Albray seemed to be lost in thought.

You can go through the wall, he suggested, excited by the plan until he saw my expression. *It's no different to your changing the composition of the parchment*, he reasoned. *Will the brick be as thin as air*.

'All right, master adviser.' I recalled that higher education and instruction was the reason I had engaged Albray's services in the first place. 'What do I do?'

Place your hands on the wall. He gestured to a space between the windows and I did as instructed. *You have the ability to do this, but if you need faith in yourself then call upon the strength of your foremothers*.

I drew a deep breath to focus and suppressed the fear that time was short.

Women of my blood, have your legacy live on, lend to me your strength, to secure my freedom'!

When the wall remained hard against my fingers, terror rose from my heart to lodge in my throat. 'Albray, I cannot...this is not working.'

My knight seemed defeated, but only for a moment. *The Star vial*, he suggested. *Put a small amount of the powder in your mouth—it heightens awareness and psychic aptitude*.

I dug the tiny vial from my attire and followed his instruction, placing just a few small particles on my tongue. I returned the vial to its hiding place, closed my eyes and repeated my request.

After a moment I could no longer feel the wall at my fingertips and I felt as though I'd moved backwards although I pressed forward. A bump on the shoulder caused my eyes to open.

'So sorry, Madame. I didn't see you there.' The gentleman I'd collided with tipped his hat and kept on walking.

I looked about to see if anyone else had noticed my mysterious exit from the building, but the Parisians were all going about their business and

paying no attention to me whatsoever.

Quick. Albray urged me into the city hustle and bustle, where I grabbed a carriage and headed straight to collect Nanny. We were leaving Paris today!

FROM THE HONEYMOON JOURNAL OF LADY SUSAN DEVERE

Mr Devere was furious and bewildered when we entered the huge archive room and no Ashlee in sight.

‘I thought I told you that no one was to unlock the door.’ Molier calmly accused Jenkins of negligence.

‘I assure you, sir, no one entered and no one left.’ His eyes looked about the room, unable to explain the woman’s disappearance.

‘My apologies, Jenkins.’ Molier was distracted by something on the windowed side of the room. He stood between the windows, fascinated by a piece of wall.

‘What is that?’ Devere asked, taking an interest in Molier’s probing.

‘I can’t see anything.’ I moved closer to learn what held them both spellbound.

‘There is a large patch in the wall, here, that is slightly more vibrant than the rest of the surface,’ Devere explained.

‘Quickly,’ Molier directed our attention to the wall, ‘it’s reconstituting.’

‘Pardon?’ Devere frowned as Molier pressed on the wall and it gave like rubber under his fingers. When he took the pressure off, the wall appeared completely normal.

When Devere and I tried it, it gave less and less and finally returned to being completely solid.

‘That’s incredible.’ It was hard to keep the smile from my lips. I had no idea Ashlee was capable of such feats. ‘Are you suggesting Ashlee passed straight through this wall?’

‘I’ve never witnessed such mastery,’ Molier smiled and confirmed my guess. ‘If this was your wife’s doing, then Mrs Devere is an exceptional woman indeed.’

‘She must be close.’ Devere moved quickly to the window and, forgetting Molier’s condition, held open the curtains.

Molier gave a cry ahead of raising his hood and burying his hands in his sleeves.

‘I am so sorry.’ Devere realised his mistake and enclosed the curtains around him to look outside. ‘I can’t see her,’ he admitted, frustrated, as he emerged from the far side of the fabric. ‘She is gone, and I have no idea where!’

‘I know where she is heading next,’ Molier announced from beneath his hood, and our hopes were raised. ‘Rome,’ he informed us. ‘And as coincidence would have it, I myself, and other officials from this library, are to embark on a journey to Rome on the morrow...your party is very welcome to join us.’

Clearly, Devere was disposed to accept, but I, however, was not.

‘We shall get back to you on that count, Mr Molier,’ I said quickly.

‘We have much to consider before laying any firm plans, you understand?’

‘Of course,’ he said.

‘I’ll send word before evening if it is possible for us to leave tomorrow.’ I took my brother’s arm and when we had departed the library I was relieved.

‘You have some very creepy associates, Mr Devere,’ I commented in an aside to him.

‘I should not have waited to speak with her.’ Devere was cursing himself. ‘God knows what she thinks of me now, if she has connected me with that *thing!*’

‘Thing?’ I repeated. ‘That’s a rather cutting description for anyone. Mr Molier wasn’t quite that bad.’

‘There’s something definitely not right about that man.’ Devere sounded deadly sure about that. ‘Let us hope that we never have to find out what that defect is.’

‘Whoa.’ I put Ashlee’s journal aside. The story was starting to spin me out, or perhaps it was lack of food that was making me lightheaded. ‘This is too much.’ I slid off the bed to put the kettle on. I badly needed a cup of tea. *Does Albray really expect me to believe that my new employer is a vampire and that Ashlee Granville could walk through walls!* ‘Give me a break!’ I prepared my cuppa feeling frustrated and annoyed—but why? Was it

because I didn't believe Albray could be so gullible as to swear to the truth of the story I was reading? No, that wasn't what had me all flustered.

Keeping your company, each day brings its own rewards.

It was both enchanting and perplexing reading a tale that Albray was a character in. I so envied Ashlee's relationship with him—if they really were as close as the journal boasted. I wanted him as a confidant and a friend too, not just as a teacher and protector. Why was it that Albray would let his guard down with Ashlee and not me? Was it because I was so wanting in psychic ability? A magical flair certainly seemed to be the main female attribute that Albray found alluring—it figured that it was the one attribute I didn't have.

I had to pull myself up at this point and remind myself that Albray was a phantasm, or a hallucination, or something to that effect. Whatever he was, it was certainly not a healthy relationship to be obsessing about.

The storm was still giving my tent a good battering, and rather than go straight back to my reading, I thought to check my email. Andre had sent me a note to ask how I was faring in the storm and if I needed anything. There was also an email from C & M constructions. My heart skipped a beat when I saw Christian Molier's name on the bottom.

Surely this is not the same man that killed Albray, or the same man Ashlee fled Paris to escape? I calmed myself with my realistic reasoning. 'Unless Albray means Molier is a reincarnation of the man that murdered him, but they have the same name.' Perhaps this Molier was a descendant?

In the email Christian Molier apologised for not being at Mt Serâbit to welcome me to the team, explaining that he had a very high melatonin output, and strong sunlight affected his mental capacity.

Indeed, melatonin came from the Greek words *melos*, meaning black, and *tosis*, meaning labour, and thus people with this condition were referred to as 'night operatives'—which could have been where Albray got his vampire notion from.

Mr Molier also informed me that he knew where to obtain some of the white powder that was found in the Hathor Temple last century, and that a barrel would be delivered within days.

This was good—I could test my theory. Still, I had the distinct impression that this was the last thing Albray wanted.

As I was online, I thought I might surf the net and investigate another part of Ashlee's tale that had me intrigued—the Mary Magdalene connection.

Albray had said that Ashlee was a descendant of the Black Madonna, which, if proven true, would mean I was as well! Devere had also hinted at some godlike gene that was passed down through this Grail bloodline via the female descendants.

I started my research with the god-gene and discovered that recently it had been discovered that the prominent gene of succession is carried within the blood of the mother, known as 'mitochondrial DNA'. I also found an article online which talked about the Gene of Isis and the Grail bloodline, which sounded like a pile of chivalric propaganda, but I wanted to see what it had to say.

The writer spoke of a bloodline that extended back through time to the very dawn of civilisation. It spoke of select men being fed the ambrosia of the gods in order to heighten their mental, emotional and physical ability.

Interestingly enough, Gra-al, an old Mesopotamian term, was translated as the 'nectar of supreme excellence'. The Celtic word Graal meant 'cup of the stone'.

The article went on to say that an ancient Royal Scottish Order of knights were known as the Order of Sangréal, and they were closely allied to the European Order of the Realm of Sion. The knights of both orders were adherents of the Sangréal, which defined the true Blood Royal of Judah: the bloodline of the Holy Grail.

Which means that Albray is most probably connected to the same brotherhood that Earnest Devere later joined. 'Even wonderfully clever Ashlee hasn't worked that one out yet,' I smugly mumbled to myself.

What is that you're doing?

Albray startled the life out of me. He was leaning over my shoulder and staring at my computer screen in complete awe.

'Magic,' I teased, returning to the previous page.

Albray knew I was teasing him, and he gave me a disappointed look.

'Research,' I replied more honestly. 'I was looking into the Gene-of-Isis.'

And how is the reading going?

I drew a deep breath. 'I'm up to where Ashlee flees Paris, and I've got to ask you...how is it possible that my boss, Christian Molier, could be the same man Ashlee fled from in Paris and the same man who killed you nearly six hundred years before that?'

Star-Fire, Albray replied. *Or, in Molier's case, mainly just the Fire. He's been taking it so long to sustain himself that he can no longer expose himself to sunlight without risk of brain damage.*

'Albray...' I thought it time to give him a little science lesson. 'Molier can't go out in the sun because he has a high pineal gland secretion.' As I said this, I realised that this was something else my boss had in common with Ashlee's Mr Molier.

And what do you think caused this condition of Molier's? Albray posited, as if he already knew the answer.

'A defect in Molier's DNA.' I shrugged and then thought to explain. 'DNA is—'

I realise you refer to his genetic code, Albray said, surprising me with his knowledge. *In Molier's case it was a forced mutation...he was not born with the disorder.*

'How do you know?' I asked, as he sounded so sure about it.

I knew Christian Molier when he could still frequent the great outdoors in the daylight hours. It was not until that day in the library with Mrs Devere that I learned of his skin condition.

'And you're sure it was the same Christian Molier?' It was not a favourable look I received in response. 'I'm sorry.' I accepted that it was a stupid question. 'Then explain to me how this Fire substance works, and what it is made up of. I mean, I understand the Star substance and most of its creation process.'

Star-Fire is the melding of Heaven and Earth, male and female, the physical, emotional and mental bodies with the spiritual body. The Fire preceded the Star; it promoted perception, awareness and intuition, stamina, the immune system and, thus, longevity. Ever wonder why the leaders of the ancient world lived so long? They were fed this ambrosia. But the Fire was not brewed to enhance psychic ability...that could only be activated upon a pleasurable union with a female of the sacred bloodline. Still, the light would remain, although dormant, in a spiritually unawakened person.

‘But what was the substance made of to make it so sacred and vitality-promoting?’

It is said that the Fire vial contains an extract drawn from the menstrual flow of the Nefilim goddess, Ninharsag, also known as Isis, Albray baldly stated, and I began to feel sick. ‘Oh, my god!’ I covered my mouth, shocked. ‘Is that what you meant when you said Molier was a vampire?’

Albray nodded and I really felt sick. *If it makes you feel any better, the drinking of blood was banned before my time by the church, who wished to undermine the power of the ancient order of Star-Fire priestesses. But by that time, alchemy had come of age and the process to create the Star was rediscovered and then lost. But together they are the body and blood, the bread and the wine, of Christianity, and in Egyptian belief they are the white wheat and red barley fields of Heaven.*

There was a desperate scratching at my tent flap.

‘Come in!’

It was Andre who crawled in under my door. ‘Bonsoir, Mia. I was just heading up to the Hathor Complex. I think the storm is dying down a bit, and, in any case, inside the complex we will be protected from the elements. I thought you might want to come have a look?’

‘Ah...?’ I glanced at Albray, who rolled his eyes and gave me leave with a wave. ‘Yeah, that would be great, but can I meet you in the mess? I just need to get changed.’

‘Aw, you take all the fun out of life,’ Andre grumbled. ‘I could just turn around. I promise I won’t look.’

I just folded my arms with a smile and waited for him to depart.

We need to work on your psychic skills, Albray impressed on me as soon as Andre left.

‘Look, I’m really sorry to disappoint you but I don’t have any psychic talent.’ I stripped off my shorts and pulled on a pair of jeans. ‘And here in the real world, I have to work.’ I looked up to find Albray gobsmacked, and then I realised I had changed my outfit and he probably wasn’t too used to women doing that in front of him. ‘Look, if my body is so offensive, you could leave, or turn away, or—’

On the contrary, I am honoured. He tried not to smile too broadly.

Inside, my heart leapt. Albray finally saw me! ‘So you are human after all?’ I posed the question in a suggestive manner to see if he’d bite.

He leant back a little. *I think that you Grail women enjoy teasing me.*

‘I never tease,’ I informed him bluntly.

Then what do you call this?

I gasped in amusement at his implication. ‘You know what I think...I think you’re the tease, Albray.’

He appeared even more amused and shocked when the accusation was thrown back at him. *I don’t know what you mean.*

‘Is that right?’ If he wasn’t going to admit to feeling anything for me, there was little point in pursuing this conversation any further. ‘Well then, I’m going.’ I turned away from Albray, removed my singlet and replaced it with a long-sleeved white shirt. ‘I shouldn’t be too long.’ I didn’t look back to catch his reaction, but threw a scarf over my head, wrapped the ends around my shoulders and braved the gale outside.

Even though it was not far to the temple complex, Andre drove us there in his cherished Humvee, which went everywhere with him. He’d scored this oversized, black, super-tough, soft-top jeep when he’d done some excavation work for the American military, and their gift to him had ensured that, to this day, he never spoke of what the project with the US military had entailed.

‘Alone at last,’ Andre announced, as we completed our dash through the Main Court, the Sanctuary, the Portico and into the shelter of the Cave of Hathor.

‘Alone is right.’ I avoided his implication. ‘The storm must be keeping the tourists away.’

‘*Oui*. The tours won’t come up here in these conditions. So,’ he indicated the shrine in which we stood, throwing his arms wide, ‘what do you think?’

This cave had been carved into the natural rock, and had flat inner walls that had somehow been rubbed smooth. In the centre was a large upright pillar of Amenemhet III.

‘It must have been magnificent,’ I mumbled, and recalled the words of the man who’d uncovered the whole of the Hathor complex in 1906. ‘*There*

is no other such monument known that makes us regret more that it is not in better preservation.'

'Well, the place was buried and lost to the world for about three thousand years,' Andre remarked.

Not entirely, I considered on the quiet—for Albray had been here in the thirteenth century and Lord Hamilton's largely ignored work had brought him here in the early nineteenth century.

The sands of time had taken their toll on what must once have been an imposing and majestic structure. And yet, the walls still had many tales to tell. I moved closer and pulled out a notebook and pen. It seemed highly likely that this temple would hold clues to opening the mysterious entrance we'd uncovered—or hint at what we might expect to find therein. 'It states here that the main function of the temple masters was the production of *mfkzt*.'

'*Oui*,' Andre confirmed. 'There seems to be a dispute as to what that actually was. Some think copper or malachite, but as this mountain is riddled with turquoise mines we were told that turquoise is the most likely possibility. And the goddess Hathor is known as the mistress of turquoise.'

'As was Isis,' I added, 'but only if the word *mfkzt* has not been mistranslated. Petrie didn't uncover turquoise at the site, only our strange white powder.' I stepped back to consider the entire wall. 'The numerous mentions of light and bread in these hieroglyphs suggest "our Bread of Life" seems more on the mark. Hathor was also renowned as "the mother of light". Ra may have been the sun, but Hathor was the divine power behind the great solar deity.'

This went back to what Albray had been saying about kings only being awakened by their queens, for the females carried the power of the gods and men could only hope to absorb that power via a good marriage. Perhaps this was why women were bound to be made happy by the love they gave, and men by the love they received.

'Hathor was also a protector of women...' Andre added.

Granting females the power to awaken a superhuman ability was certainly a way of ensuring their survival and the respect of men. I remembered the effect Ashlee Granville had had on Earnest Devere—he'd gone so far as to describe his love as an addiction!

‘Which probably explains why only a woman can open the door we’ve uncovered,’ Andre finished his thought.

‘So, let us suppose,’ I hypothesised, ‘that the priests did manufacture the manna or ORME here—’

‘To what end?’ Andre played devil’s advocate. ‘To open the lower entrance we’ve uncovered?’

‘To manufacture superior building materials to make such a structure, perhaps?’ I raised my eyebrows, intrigued by the idea. ‘They would certainly have used such a substance to enlighten their priest-kings and priestess-queens...’

In my mind’s eye I saw a vision of how this place had appeared at the height of its glory. This had been a structure so grand as to rival any ancient temple of the period. Desperately clinging to my unique ancient perspective, I turned to view the undamaged altar and column and the unweathered text that lined everything herein. Beyond the one entrance into the Cave of Hathor, I beheld the closed-in Portico and through another grand doorway sunlight fell onto the paved floor of the Sanctuary of the Goddess that was open to the sky.

I blinked and snapped out of my trance. It wasn’t like me to vague out like that and my imagination usually left a lot to be desired. ‘They could have used the substance to heal their sick.’ I resumed my contemplation of the true purpose of this place. ‘They could probably nurture the earth and enhance their produce, and any number of things I cannot even conceive of. It certainly explains why Moses might have led his people here. There’s a whole new slant on the golden calf incident, as Hathor was sometimes represented as a cow, and manna has also been called alchemist’s gold.’ I smiled, as I thought that Lord Hereford was probably right in assuming that this truly was the mountain of Moses.

Which reminded me—I had yet to read Lord Hamilton’s account, and that might prove mighty insightful at this stage. After all, he had opened our mysterious door...how else could he have the Star vial in his possession? I made a mental note to scan through Hamilton’s journal upon returning to my tent.

I ceased my wondering and looked at Andre, who was smiling amiably at me.

‘Your mind is an amazing place, Mia Montrose.’ He moved to approach me, when his beeper went off. ‘The gods really hate me!’ He grabbed his pager from his belt to read the message. ‘It’s Molier. I’ll have to head back down to camp to call him. Do you want to stay a while? I can come back for you.’

All alone in an ancient Egyptian temple? Hell, yes. ‘That would be great, Andre. *Merci.*’

In Andre’s absence I got some work done. I’d discovered what I suspected to be the quantities of asena, acacia and *mfkzt* (manna?), needed to make the Star vial substance. The names of the ingredients had all been chiselled away, so I was not sure which quantity belonged to which substance in the sacred brew.

I was so engrossed, I didn’t look up when I heard Andre return. ‘I think I’ve found the formula.’

When an enthusiastic response was not forthcoming, I looked up to find Akbar and wished I could have prevented my gasp of shock. ‘Akbar, you startled me.’ I stood up to address him, as he was some distance away. ‘Did Andre send you to fetch me?’

‘You do not belong here,’ the imposing foreigner, all dressed in black, stated calmly, then pulled a large curved sword from beneath his robes.

‘Do you mean I do not belong in this sanctuary?’ I attempted to reason with him while I inched around to put the remains of the altar between myself and he who was threatening to cause me bodily harm.

‘I mean...on this mountain.’

Akbar came running at the altar and somersaulted over it, whereupon I made for the cave entrance, only to be confronted by another pair of locals who grabbed hold of one of my arms each and dragged me back into the cave-shrine.

‘Let go of me!’ I protested, and struggled to no avail. ‘What the hell do you think you’re doing?’ I didn’t even have my stone on me, so I couldn’t call Albray for help. Yet in my mind I screamed for his aid, as he was my only hope of getting out of this, short of a busload of tourists suddenly arriving in the teeth of the gale outside. ‘Surely you can’t expect to get away with killing me?’

‘Have you seen the cliffs on the far side of this mountain? There is no recovering a body that has fallen down there.’ Now that I had no chance of going anywhere, Akbar took his time to stroll over and taunt me with my impending death. ‘You shall not defile this sacred place with your foul presence any longer, American.’

‘I’m an *Australian*,’ I stressed, hoping the fact might lessen his wrath.

‘Is there a difference?’ he replied, nodding to his associates to force me to my knees so that he might remove my head.

Praise be to Hathor, Albray joined me at that moment. The sweet relief I felt at his presence enfolding me cannot be put into words. It felt like a tremendous gift of love, but whether this sentiment stemmed from myself or my protector, I could not tell.

My feet now firmly planted to the ground, I resisted my captor’s intent by stepping back and swinging the men into each other with such force they staggered backward in a daze.

As Akbar lashed out with his sword, I dived into a tuck roll, and then, turning about on my haunches, I swung a leg wide into the back of Akbar’s legs and he went crashing to the ground. I jumped up, used his face as a football, and stomped on his sword arm to retrieve his razor-sharp weapon. I held it beneath his chin. ‘I’ll cut his throat as quickly as he would have cut mine,’ I threatened, and his accomplices backed up. I turned my attention back to Akbar, as he was obviously the man in charge. ‘What if I can prove to you that I have a perfect right to be here?’ I found myself saying it, yet Albray had control of my body at present and I wondered what he planned.

‘This cannot be settled by a work visa,’ Akbar snarled, humiliated by his defeat at the hands of a foreign woman. ‘It is about—’

‘Being of the *blood*.’ I finished his sentence, and managed to gain his ear with my words.

I stood and tossed the sword straight up, where it lodged in the roof. *Pardon* me...I heard Albray’s voice in my mind, as he raised my hands and ripped open my shirt to expose the mark between my breasts. I was horrified to have done so in front of the local men, until they all got to their knees and bowed down before me in apology. Albray closed my shirt and held it together with one hand.

‘Daughter of Isis, forgive us.’ Akbar did not look up as he spoke. ‘We live only to serve you.’

‘What!’ My voice responded at last to my command, as I felt Albray withdraw. I was left dazed and staggering with the impact that the extreme effort had had on my body.

‘I told you that men worship you, Mia.’ Andre happened upon the scene, and was amused until he noticed I was holding my shirt together. ‘Are you all right, Mia?’ He looked from the cowering men to me. ‘What happened to your shirt?’

‘I, ah...tripped and ripped it.’ It sounded weak but it would do. I looked back to the men paying me homage. ‘Thank you for showing me that prayer ritual, Akbar. It was very informative, but you can get up now.’ I hurried him along with my hand and he obliged me, motioning his men to follow him. ‘I’m done here, for the moment.’ I fetched my notes and left the cave, leaving Andre to bring up the rear.

The storm had worn itself out and blue skies prevailed, along with the searing heat of the sun. There was clear fresh air to breathe and I filled my lungs with it, having felt like I’d not drawn breath during that entire incident.

When Andre joined me at his jeep, he knew something was not quite right. He climbed into the car and started it up, and as he turned to look behind and reverse, he commented, ‘I could have sworn I saw a sword hanging from the roof in the cave just now.’ He looked at me for a comment, after he’d backed up the car.

‘Don’t ask.’ I ended the conversation by pointing him toward camp.

I used work-related research as an excuse to part with Andre and take dinner in my tent. I really was dying to look into Lord Hamilton’s account of opening the mysterious entrance in the mountain that was currently puzzling us.

I entered my tent to find a forlorn Albray. ‘I am so sorry I wasn’t there sooner...are you all right?’

‘Don’t apologise,’ I insisted, suppressing a grin. The thought of him ripping my shirt open infused me with such desire that my cheeks burned—thank god I was not wearing the stone! ‘It felt incredible to be so powerful and able to control the situation.’ I badly mimicked how I rescued myself. ‘You must have been a very great knight, Albray.’ I came to a standstill.

He shied from the suggestion. 'If I had been a very great knight then Molier would be dead.'

He wasn't good at taking a compliment; this score Albray had to settle with Molier was undermining his self-esteem badly. 'I don't suppose you want to talk about Molier?'

Albray shook his head. 'I'd really rather that you read the details. The tale is very long and complicated, and Mrs Devere is a much better storyteller than I.'

'As you wish.' I let the issue go, as it obviously disturbed him. I didn't mention that I was going to take a look at Lord Hamilton's journal first, because Albray was opposed to opening the mysterious entrance. Whether we opened the door or not, I still had to discover the key.

'I shall leave you to read.' My knight disappeared through the wall of the tent.

It was only after Albray had gone that I thought to tell him that I suspected I'd had a vision whilst in the Cave of Hathor. I fancied that my psychic ability was kicking in. But why now, when I had never shown any aptitude, or taken any ability-enhancing elixir? I couldn't help but feel it was due to Albray's influence: not that he'd developed my talent, but, rather, inspired it. He made me feel, for the first time, that anything was possible. Albray had done the same for Ashlee by granting her physical liberation from the constraints of her era. He had given me spiritual freedom, despite the restraints of my scientific mind. A week ago, I would never have considered psychic ability possible, let alone that I was psychic. Or perhaps it was just wishful thinking, because I wanted to impress Albray the way Ashlee obviously had.

'Paid work first,' I resolved.

Armed with tea and chocolate, I found the silver key that opened Lord Hamilton's big green journal and, placing the book on my desk, I opened it up under the lamplight and sat down to read.

I skipped over Hamilton's account of his early days in the Middle East and the funding troubles they'd had with the excavation of the mountain. I took up the tale where the discovery of the superstrong doorway had led to the project being served notice to wrap up their dig—their excavation permit had been revoked.

LESSON 11

DARKNESS

FROM THE JOURNAL OF LADY CLARISSA HAMILTON

The night before our departure from Serâbit el-Khâdim, Lord Hamilton was in a highly-strung, depressed mood, and quite the worse for drink. This was understandable when one considered that my husband had devoted twenty years to the excavation of this mountain, only to be locked out when he was on the verge of a major discovery.

In the middle of the small section of the site we'd managed to unearth, my dear Mr Hamilton had taken to the mountain with a shovel. He dug by lantern light, determined to make use of every hour he had left to excavate.

We'd seen all our fellow archaeologists depart in the past few weeks, and all our hired hands had left to find new work. Only a couple of guides and the camels kept us company in the barren wilderness in those last few days.

I stood there and watched my husband dig for some time that evening, but he was unaware of my presence before I made it known. I asked him what he hoped to achieve at this late hour of our stay in the Holy Land. He was certainly in no fit state to stumble into a potentially precarious situation. And even if he did manage to find the key to unlock the mysterious door we'd unearthed, we had to leave by noon the next day or we would not have enough water to comfortably sustain us for the journey back to civilisation.

'If I find something tonight then we will bloody well ration—'

My Lord Hereford was not given the chance to finish his sentence, for as he slammed the tip of his spade into the earth, the soil gave way beneath him and he disappeared from my sight.

Fearful for my husband's wellbeing, I went forward and dropped on to my stomach to call into the dark abyss. My cries resounded in the space that

opened out below the hole that Hamilton had fallen through. I knew he was alive; I could hear him coughing.

Fortunately, the drink had relaxed him and small piles of soft sand on the floor of the chamber had also cushioned his fall. He hadn't broken any bones, which was a great relief indeed, considering our imminent departure. Hamilton requested that I tie a lantern on a rope and lower it down to him.

He had landed in a room filled with hieroglyphs—the walls and the square central pillar were covered in them. The floor was entirely covered by fine white sand, and both doorways leading out of the chamber were collapsed and blocked. When Hamilton bent down to dig into the floor, he realised the substance that covered it was not sand. It felt like ash to the touch, and yet it was as white as snow. The tiny particles were so fine that they began to rise and dance toward the lantern flame. When he held his hand down close to the powder, it was attracted to his skin. 'Must be the heat,' he'd concluded, then was flabbergasted at the sight of his lantern slowly levitating toward the ceiling.

When I heard my husband chuckling, I leant over the hole to see what amused him.

'Boo!' Hamilton stuck his head through the ground and startled the life out of me.

I squealed at the unexpected apparition and then laughed with relief as I recognised my husband. 'How did you get up here?' I had been wondering if I was going to have to wake our guides to hoist Mr Hamilton out of the hole he'd dug for himself.

'I'm floating!' he announced with a chuckle. He hoisted himself out of the hole to sit on the side and dust the mysterious powder off, so that he wouldn't float away into the stratosphere. 'I believe I've had a revelation regarding the key to our mysterious door.'

'Evidently,' I concurred, as his lantern floated into my grasp. I looked at him, confused as to how this could be happening.

'This powder reacts to heat,' he said, laughing at the simplicity of the solution. 'I strongly suspect that the sun will open the door for us.'

The next morning we were up with the sun. We had covered the gaping hole in the mountain with a boulder after withdrawing several buckets of powder

from the chamber—the last thing we needed was for the sun to heat, and float away, all the mysterious powder.

Since uncovering the entrance door in the side of the mountain, we had noted how the mysterious substance used in its construction was heated to extreme temperatures during the day. So our plan was this: wait for the door to heat up and then we would cast this powder over the metal—even if it didn't all instantly stick to it, the door was the hottest thing in the immediate area and the particles would surely be attracted to it. Our theory was that once the sun baked the powder the door would lift right out of its frame.

If we did get the entrance open, there was every reason to believe that it would be dark inside. We had our guides prepare some torches for us. For this they used rags, doused in an absolutely foul-smelling oil, which were then bound tightly to the top of a stake—not only did the oil burn well and slowly, the locals swore that the scent kept the insects at bay too.

And so we waited for the day to heat up and here in the Sinai one did not have to wait very long.

I stood by, shaded under my umbrella, while Mr Hamilton tossed buckets of powder over our mysterious round entrance into the mountain. As anticipated, we lost very little of the powder to the hot breeze. Exposed to the morning's heat, the tiny granules began to emit light, glistening like snowflakes in the full gaze of the sun. Like nails drawn to a magnet, the light specks settled upon the mysterious metal doorway.

'So far so good.' Hamilton came to stand beside me and bear witness to what eventuated.

The metal of the doorway did react with the particles, but not in the way we'd expected. Instead of lifting the door out of its frame the powder began eating into the metal, reducing it to pure light, until nothing was left inside the black circle of hieroglyphs that marked the perimeter of the entrance.

At this point our guides begged us not to enter, and requested that we all leave at once.

Hamilton refused to leave; the guides refused to stay.

'I know the way to the Suez Canal blindfolded.' Hamilton insisted that if they wanted to leave they should do so. 'I release you from your duties... go, with my blessing.' He looked at me, and I know I did not appear as

confident at being left without a guide as he would have liked. ‘You trust me, don’t you, Mrs Hamilton?’

If I had answered in the negative, I would have found myself on one of those camels, accompanying our guides home. ‘I married you, didn’t I?’ was my reply. The way I saw it, I should give my husband confidence in our relationship or I would defeat the point of my staying. If I was going to die out here, at least I would meet my death in the arms of the man I loved. Deep down, I knew Hamilton would get us home as he promised, for it was not in his nature to fail. ‘Besides,’ I pointed out, ‘the inscription around the door did specify that a woman had to enter this shrine first, so for a change, Mr Hamilton, you cannot do without me.’

The love and admiration on his face filled me with such joy of being! ‘I should never be able to do without you, my dear.’ He took my hands in his and kissed them both. ‘You are a once-in-a-lifetime partner. Praise god I didn’t allow you to pass me by.’

My husband was far too charming and handsome for my own good; my family had always said so. He could talk me into anything, and I had followed him to the ends of the earth just for the pleasure of his company.

I had to take a break from reading; I couldn’t see for the tears streaming down my face. ‘This is so romantic.’ I gasped for breath and blew my nose. ‘No wonder Ashlee wanted to marry Lord Hamilton. I want to marry him too.’

But it wasn’t Lord Hamilton who had me in tears—it was Clarissa, loving her husband so much that she would stay in a barren wilderness with him. It can’t have been easy for a woman in her day and age to adjust to life in the Sinai, and then to accompany Hamilton into an unknown ancient shrine showed exceptional courage. The Egyptians went to great lengths not to have their sacred places looted or defiled. Going through that doorway could be fraught with danger and possibly booby traps.

I blew my nose again and attempted to steady my breathing.

It had been very interesting to read that the powder found on-site had opened the entrance without needing to be blended with other ingredients, which seemed to indicate that the substance had already been transmuted into the Bread of Life. And perhaps it had still been glowing and levitating things when Petrie uncovered the site in the early twentieth century, but the

information might have been deliberately omitted from the record of Petrie's excavation.

'I was right about how the powder affects the door though.'

I was also thankful to discover that the foul-smelling insect repellent I'd found in the back of the red book, along with Albray's stone, was not meant to be applied to one's body. Still, I wondered why it was important enough to include in the family inheritance. Surely modern insect repellents would prove more effective than the smoke from a roughly-made torch?

I carried the tissues with me back to the desk in case I needed them, and having made a fresh cup of tea, I continued reading the Hamiltons' account of Serâbit el-Khâdim.

FROM THE JOURNAL OF LADY CLARISSA HAMILTON

So, there we were—two little people on a big mountain, in the middle of a huge desert, and we were about to enter a place that had not been open to the world in god knows how long.

Torches lit, we approached the opening, and drew a deep breath.

A steep path of red gold, the like of which we had never seen before—or since—provided a walkway down a tunnel leading into the mountain. We descended slowly, in awe, as it was all perfectly preserved. The entire length of the passageway was lined with gold into which hieroglyphs were inscribed in straight lines that passed overhead from one side of the tunnel path to the other.

The silence inside the tunnel was unnerving, as was the smell of stale air that became increasingly overwhelming the further down we travelled. The entrance into the mountain was still within our sight when the tunnel ended, although the daylight fell well short of being any aid to us. Here, the skeletal remains of a warrior greeted us. The bones sprawled across our path were clad in chain mail and still clutched the weapons that had failed to save his life.

'Well, it would seem this tunnel has been opened in the last six hundred years at least,' commented Hamilton, having looked over the body to assess the era to which it belonged. 'This fellow belonged to a breakaway French faction of the Templar Knights...he bears the emblem of the Order de Sion.'

‘Why did these knights split from the original chapter of the Templars?’ I thought this might have some relevance as to how the knight had come to meet his end in this place.

Hamilton explained to me that the purpose of the Crusades was to seek the sacred relics of the Holy Land on behalf of the church and to protect them from the infidels who were not of the faith. The Templar Knights were a breakaway faction formed from within the upper echelons of the crusading knights; for the discoveries and contacts they made in the Holy Land caused this elite group of knights to think twice about surrendering the relics and secret doctrine they discovered there to the church. The Templars took measures to hide their discoveries, including the formation of an inner order of the Templars, known as the Order of Sion, whose existence was kept a secret. The Templars became the public face of the order, that by all appearances still supported the church’s cause in the Holy Land, whilst the Order of Sion saw to the concealment and protection of ancient relics, places and doctrine. Many of this secret order of knights belonged to the disinherited Judaic line of kings who had settled in the Languedoc area at the time of Jesus Christ. When the church began the Albigensian Crusade and sent crusading knights to wipe out the Cathar heretics who were suspected to be hiding the Templars’ treasures, the Templar Knights’ loyalties were tested, for they could not stop the slaughter for fear of having their loyalty to the church come into question and a charge of heresy brought against their entire order—still, the following century that was exactly what happened. Thus the Sion knights were called in to retrieve the sacred relics and spirit them away to safekeeping. It was speculated that some of the treasures were returned to their shrines in the Holy Land.

‘And how is it that you know so much about these supposedly *secret* brotherhoods?’ I had always suspected that my Lord Hamilton belonged to such an order himself, although of course he would not speak of it.

He smiled, and gave me his typical response. ‘Oh, I read.’

‘So our friend could have returned a sacred relic to this place, and then been trapped here?’ I suggested. ‘The question we should ask ourselves is *how* he became trapped.’ I looked back to the open exit in the distance.

‘Look here.’ Hamilton was down on his haunches inspecting the neck bones. ‘This man was beheaded...almost.’ The bone had held firm, but a

mighty gash to the front of the neckbone revealed much. 'The blow would certainly have been enough to kill him.'

'Thank you for that insight, my love.' I moved around the knight, and as my torchlight illuminated the huge room before me I caught my breath.

Continuing on from the entrance where we stood the red-gold path led through a round chamber, and at the far end was a large, golden arched door. In the centre of the room was a round platform, and two red pathways passed in opposite directions through it, forming a crossroads. Concentric rings, built in sandstone, radiated out from the central platform. The first ring from the centre formed an empty canal a few feet in depth. The next ring was wide and level with the height of the pathway: at each of its four quarters was an ornate pillar dedicated to a different Egyptian goddess. These mighty pillars supported the bulk of the domed ceiling, which sparkled like gold wherever the torchlight flickered upon it. The next ring was another canal, a little wider and deeper than the first. The final ring ran around the wall of the round chamber and was a plain stone pathway. Directly beside where we stood at the entrance, a large lever extended from the floor; we decided not to investigate its purpose just yet.

'This has got to be the find of the millennium,' Hamilton muttered under his breath as he gazed up at one of the four pillars. This particular one depicted Isis.

'That's probably what our knight friend thought,' I commented as I passed my husband on my way to the central platform. 'And yet, I feel sure he didn't cut his own throat.'

'No point in being alarmist, Mrs Hamilton.' He followed me to the central platform to investigate what lay at the east and west ends of the red crossroads.

The chamber was so large that all we could make out from where we stood was that each path led to a darkened entrance, beyond which we could see nothing from this distance. One entrance was adorned with red pillars, the other with white.

'Wait here,' Hamilton instructed, heading off toward the red-pillared entrance. As he drew closer, I noticed the glyph for 'fire' inset above the doorway. As he passed into the small room beyond the pillared entrance, there was a cry of pain, but it was not my husband who cried out.

From the annexe emerged a dark spirit, moaning in unearthly agony. I gasped when I realised it was headed straight for me, whereupon it immediately changed course and followed the outer path around the wall toward the exit passage. When my fear ceased to drown out all my other senses, I realised I could hear footsteps and that it was no spectre I was viewing, but a human being wearing a long hooded black cloak. As the intruder escaped the chamber, I ran to see what had become of my husband.

‘Hamilton!’ I screamed, demanding a response if he could give it.

‘Don’t panic,’ he said, sounding preoccupied.

Through the red-pillared doorway was an annexe and there I found Hamilton inspecting an ornately decorated tablet inset in a plinth. ‘This appears to have held something of great spiritual import. “This Fire ignites the wisdom and strength of the Gods”,’ he read. ‘And see here...there is a small hollow which is obviously meant to hold something.’

‘That man was a thief, do you think?’ I asked. Then I noticed my husband’s arm was dripping blood. ‘Oh, my lord, you’re wounded!’

Hamilton explained that our surprise guest had wielded a sword to make a path to the door and had nicked my husband when he failed to move aside fast enough. He insisted that I not fuss, as it didn’t hurt.

‘Do you think he slipped in here before or after we entered?’ I queried, as Hamilton made for the central chamber.

‘Judging from his adverse reaction to the light of my torch, I’d say he’d been down here a while.’

‘How is it possible that anyone could survive in this place when it has been buried for centuries?’ I appealed, practically running to keep pace with Hamilton as he made for the white-pillared doorway.

‘I wish I knew,’ he replied as we approached the white annexe, above which was inset the glyph for ‘star’.

Inside the small room, inserted in the hollow in the top of another ornately decorated plinth and tablet was a small vial of unique beauty. It was filled with a fine white substance, much like the powder we’d used to get the exterior door open. The longer we stood staring at the treasure in the torchlight the brighter the substance inside seemed to glow.

Hamilton leant down to translate the glyphs on the tablet: ‘From this Star flows the eternal powers of the goddess’. Hamilton stood and reached for the vial, but it would not release from the stone tablet in which it was

imbedded. 'There must be a trick to it.' He looked to the door, torn as to what to do next. 'I should go after him.'

'No, please...' I urged my husband against it. 'You have no weapon and what happens to me if you are killed? No find is worth our lives.'

'He has no transport out of here.' Hamilton was horrified, and he ran to prevent our unexpected company from stealing our lifeline back to civilisation—and our water.

I ran after Hamilton for part of the way, and felt some reassurance when he retrieved the sword from the dead warrior at the entrance to the tunnel. 'Stay with the Star,' he suggested more than ordered.

'Be careful,' I begged as Hamilton disappeared up the tunnel and out of my sight. 'I'll just hope that there aren't any more nasty surprises down here,' I added quietly.

The huge central chamber felt rather ominous without my husband's presence and I moved back toward the white-pillared annexe to watch over the Star as requested.

I wonder what triggers the release of the vial? Now, there was something useful I could do. I smiled when I thought of the lever and hurried back to the tunnel entrance to see if I could shift it.

The lever only went one way, down, and when I shifted it into position, the sound of running liquid reached my ears. I moved quickly to see clear liquid pouring into the empty canals via holes that sat below the level of the walkways. My heart leapt for joy, thinking the liquid was water. When I reached down to dip my hand into the flow, the liquid felt oily and smelt nearly as bad as the insect oil used in our torches. I hurried back to the lever and raised it, and the liquid ceased to flow.

Disappointed, I wandered back to the white annexe to take another look at the Star vial.

As I stood wondering why the vial wouldn't release, I touched it and it floated up into my grasp. I chuckled, rather pleased with myself, until I heard the rising hum of a swarm of insects. It sounded rather like locusts, but as the din intensified I realised it was not an airborne swarm: the sound was more like a scratchy scampering. 'Scarabs!' My heart filled with dread as I approached the annexe opening and saw masses of beetles swarming into the canals. I could have attempted a dash to the tunnel, but at the rate the canals were filling I wouldn't make it past the crossroads.

‘That’s what the liquid is for!’ I threw my arms up, frustrated that I’d solved the puzzle too late. I tried placing the Star vial back in its setting, but that didn’t stop the advancing army of bugs. When the beetles began to overflow onto the red pathway I climbed up on the tablet’s plinth.

To my great surprise the beetles did not enter the annexe, but continued to pile up beyond the doorway. Maybe they couldn’t sense me if I wasn’t standing on the ground? I lowered a foot to the floor, but still no reaction.

‘Clarissa!’ Hamilton rarely called me by my first name—he was fearful for me indeed, and I him.

‘Hamilton! The lever!’ I cried and ran to the door, from where I could see Hamilton wielding his torch around his feet.

‘The locals are right about this repellent. It does keep the bugs at bay,’ he joked, having shuffled his way to the lever.

Just the sound of the mechanism being thrown was enough to send the beetles into an even wilder frenzy.

‘I suspect the liquid is—’ Before I could say ‘flammable’, my husband had lowered his torch to meet with the liquid pouring into the outer canal and fire erupted all through the canals in the central chamber. Seemingly blinded by their own fear, the scarabs fed themselves to the flame in their panic to escape it. The next thing I knew, Hamilton was running down the red path, between the walls of fire, toward me.

As soon as he reached me, my husband hugged me for dear life.

‘I’m fine,’ I assured him, holding up the Star vial. ‘I got it out.’

‘So I gathered.’ Hamilton glanced at the chamber, ablaze, beyond the annexe. ‘How much would you like to wager that we need the Fire vial to get the next chamber open?’

Sadly, I had to back his theory. ‘Time to depart then.’ I took hold of his hand, having had enough adventure for one day.

We decided to take the vial with us, in case the thief returned and stole it too. If fate would have it, perhaps we could track down the other vial and return both to this mount in the not-too-distant future? On the way out of the chamber, my husband returned the sword he’d borrowed from the dead knight and thanked him for the loan.

It wasn’t until we were outside once again that Hamilton hit me with the bad news; the thief had taken half of our supplies, and two of our

camels. Our guides had packed the animals ready to depart this afternoon, so all the thief had to do was climb on and take off. The camels loaded with our supplies had been tied up to our riding camels.

I didn't even ask Hamilton what we were going to do. I knew he intended to make the journey anyway. He saw himself as a bit superhuman and arguing would prove a waste of energy. Besides, what choice did we have but to try and make our way back to civilisation?

My husband joked briefly about sprinkling some of the levitating powder on a carpet and flying me home, only he had to confess that he could not think of how one would steer such a transport. Still, it was a good giggle in an otherwise very sobering moment.

The sun was low in the sky and we were considering leaving before dark to make the most of the cool night, when the most unusual sound met our ears—it was like metal buckling under great pressure. The sound emanated from the entrance we had opened that day, and before our very eyes the entrance to the tunnel was reconstituted into the metal door that had originally barred our entry.

'Praise the heavens we got out by sunset.' I realised how easily we could have been trapped, and the knowledge shocked me to the core.

'Indeed,' Hamilton agreed. 'We should leave before our luck runs out and a sirocco blows up.'

'Don't even joke about it,' I warned him, as the odds were against us surviving the journey as it was. Still, we had beaten the odds many times before.

As our two remaining camels carried us down Mt Serâbit, we had no idea that it would be the last time we would ever be permitted to return there. And although I suspected that the journey home would be taxing, I did not expect that it would cost me my life!

Anyone reading this journal must now be asking, 'But how did Lady Hamilton pen this memoir if she perished on the journey home from Mt Serâbit?' Since I have raised the question, perhaps you have guessed the answer. Nevertheless I will tell what I remember.

Two days short of the closest well, our water was all but gone and our camels were dehydrated. We'd kept the water for our own consumption, praying that the camels' bodily stores would maintain them until we

reached a water source. They were now too weary to carry us. We freed them of everything that was not essential to our journey home. Except for our tools, books, food, water, personal papers and a few little treasures, we left all our other possessions in the desert.

When the weaker of our two camels collapsed later that day, I pitied the animal and envied its release. Even under my umbrella, over which I had draped a long piece of fabric, the heat was relentless and I was burning to a crisp. My lips were so blistered that it was agony to wipe my tongue across them, and the whole of my body itched from the heat rash that was irritated by my tight clothes and perspiration. I had never felt so wretched and weak.

The first rule of desert travel is to never allow your mind to wander, as this is the first sign of submission to heat exhaustion. One day from water when I was seeing mirages everywhere, I knew I was fading, but I said nothing to Hamilton, who had taken less food and water than I had.

I recall reaching the point where I could not take another step. Dizziness overcame me and beyond that, I draw a blank.

Thus, I leave it to my husband, Lord Hereford, to recount what followed.

My wife was not dead when she collapsed, but I knew the reaper was not far afoot, for either of us.

I also knew that the well was only hours away—all I had to do was keep walking.

If I placed my wife on the camel, I knew it would collapse too. The only thing for it was to carry Clarissa. I wrapped her in the fabric that had been over her umbrella and bundled her up in my arms.

The first few steps were the hardest, but then my body seemed to resign itself to carrying the extra load. My throat was too parched to whistle or hum a tune, but I replayed symphonies in my head, told myself stories, and asked myself archaeological trivia questions. Anything to keep my mind active and stop it wandering.

As the sun hung low on the horizon, my pace had slowed considerably and, for the first time in my life, I doubted my ability to press on.

Then, by the blessing of all the gods, the camel began to pick up its pace and I knew the well must be near; this sign was enough to spur me on

to our saving grace.

Despite my wretched state I don't think I've ever drawn water faster. After gulping a few mouthfuls and splashing my face, I rushed to revive my wife, only to find that she had passed away in my arms en route.

No pulse, no breath and no spirit—Clarissa was an empty shell and the soul I loved so well had fled this wretched torment that I had led her into. My want of fame and prestige in my chosen field of endeavour had been the death of her, just as many had predicted it would be.

I thought the journey had extracted all the water from my body and yet I cried a river and wailed out my pain into the dark desert night. I cursed the gods for their cruelty in taking her from me when all I had ever done was to seek the truth on their behalf. And what had I to show for my loss?

Angry about what it had cost me, I pulled the Star vial from my pocket, looking about for a good rock to smash it against. The recollection of something my wife had asked me, back in what I now thought of as the Star-Fire Temple, stayed my hand.

But how is it possible that anyone could survive in this place when it has been buried for centuries before we found it?

I had suspected since I'd discovered the powder with strange gravity-defying properties, that it was the fabled Bread of Life, manna or ORME, also known as the Holy Grail. This substance was said to have major regenerative properties. But could it bring the dead back to life?

'From this Star flows the eternal powers of the goddess,' I muttered under my breath as I took up my wife's dead body to administer some of the glowing, floating powder onto her tongue, and then closed her mouth. 'Let us see just how eternal those powers are.'

Nothing happened and I feared that my love was lost forever. I leant forward and kissed her goodbye.

Clarissa's body gave a great heave; she gasped for breath and opened her eyes. When she spotted me, she smiled. 'We made it.' She held a hand to my cheek, proud of me, and I lapsed into tears of relief and joy.

'We did.' I held her tightly, inwardly vowing that I would never again risk her life for my own professional vanity.

I was absolutely howling by the time I finished the account, my tears dripping on the handwritten text and smudging the ink. 'Oh dear.' I blotted tears from my eyes with one tissue and used another tissue on the book. When I was satisfied I'd blown the page dry, I closed the big green journal and pushed it aside.

Why was I so emotional? Well, besides the truly romantic tale, knowing that Albray's bones lay in this mount had me feeling rather at odds. I'd been greatly upset to learn that he'd been almost beheaded, and if my knight's claims proved true, it had been by the hand of my current employer. In Ashlee's tale, Albray speculated that Hereford had released Molier from an imprisonment of some kind. Hereford's tale certainly confirmed that he had let something or someone out of the Star-Fire Temple when he'd opened it, but had that entity been Molier?

'My head hurts,' I decided.

Trying to follow the tale of this site with an open mind was extremely taxing to my logical brain. When I blocked out possibilities as unrealistic, nothing seemed to make sense, but if I just accepted what I was reading, then the pieces of the puzzle fell into place with ease. Needless to say, at this moment my mind felt like it was exploding! Was this why science had failed to explain some of the greater mysteries of the ancient world, because it wouldn't look beyond the realms of the logical to explain the unexplainable? How could one ever seriously hope to explain the unexplainable employing this method?

'Mia? I hear you crying. Are you all right?' Andre asked from outside of the tent.

'Yes, I'm fine,' I assured him.

'May I talk to you?'

I placed the large journals in a suitcase, out of sight, leaving only the normal reference books on my desk. 'Sure.' I gave him leave to enter, as I had been quite antisocial since my arrival here.

'Learning anything interesting?' He came in and took a seat.

'I'm making progress.' I put the kettle on. 'Tea?'

Andre declined, and I knew he had today's episode in the cave on his mind. 'Why do I get the impression that you know more about this excavation than you are telling me?'

I thought to deny his claim, but that would only make Andre suspicious and more curious. 'Because I do know more than I am saying,' I confessed. 'Or rather, I suspect many things that a little more research should clarify. I'm just waiting until I am more confident about my theories before I share...that is all.'

'Is that your polite way of telling me you plan on locking yourself away again tomorrow?' Andre smiled; he knew me too well.

I shrugged. 'That depends on how soon you want your answers?'

Andre cocked an eye at me, thinking me evasive. 'And Akbar was aiding you with your research?'

He finally arrived at the reason for his visit. 'Well nobody knows the local history like the locals,' I said, trying to fob him off lightheartedly, but Andre would not allow it.

'Did Akbar threaten you?' He put forward his concern to me plainly.

I considered the question carefully before responding. 'Quite the other way around, I should think.'

'I can dismiss him,' he offered, 'if he makes you uncomfortable.'

'He does not,' I insisted. 'We just had a misunderstanding.' Yes, the man had threatened to chop off my head and throw my body off a cliff, so why was I defending him now? Because Akbar knew something; perhaps something I didn't know. If I had him dismissed I'd never find out. 'But it's sorted.' I shrugged.

Andre nodded as though he didn't quite believe me. 'Then, why were you crying just now?'

A good question and the true answer was too bizarre to convey. 'I was just reading a romantic note that my new man left in one of my books for me to find.' It was a good lie and it reinforced my boyfriend fabrication. 'I guess I miss him.'

'Aw,' Andre sympathised, holding wide his arms. 'Hug?' He may as well have just said, 'Sex?'

'I told you, Andre, I'm fine,' I replied, downplaying my emotional state. 'I'll be reunited with him soon enough.' My heart welled to bursting when Albray came to mind, and though I'd known all along that I could not have him, the thought of him as just a pile of bones shattered my sensibilities and I burst into tears once again.

‘Oh, Mia, forgive me, I did not mean to upset you.’ Andre stood and gave me a purely platonic hug and it was nice, but when I noticed Albray watching us, I immediately pulled away. The hurt I saw on Albray’s face was as exciting to me as it was devastating.

‘I shall leave you in peace.’ Andre sensed my wishes. ‘Just call if you need *anything*.’

I nodded in acceptance, and looked at Albray when Andre departed. ‘What is the matter, Albray? You seem upset.’

I’m not upset, he insisted, straining to lower his thought conveyance to a believable tone. *I was just surprised to learn about the man in your life. You have not mentioned him before.*

I was amused by the mistake. ‘There’s nothing between myself and Andre. Not from my side anyway.’

I’m not talking about Andre. He rolled his eyes. *I refer to this man who had you in tears just now...the one you miss so much?* He endeavoured to jog my memory, as I must have appeared stumped.

‘Oh, him.’ My gut fluttered with butterflies as I summoned the courage to tell him the truth. ‘I was talking about you, Albray.’

Now he appeared stumped, but pleased nonetheless. *But I have not gone anywhere...why were you crying?*

I swallowed hard. Every time I imagined his bones I got teary. ‘I read Lord Hereford’s account of opening the Star-Fire Temple.’

Albray seemed disappointed with my topic of inquiry. I knew it ran contrary to his wishes.

‘I learned that you died here,’ my lips began to quaver under the stress, ‘and that upset me. I don’t know why.’ I couldn’t see the expression on his face, because my eyes had filled with tears. I reached for my tissues. ‘I mean, I know you’re dead, but...’ I bowed my head before confessing that I was falling in love with him all the same. When I could finally see Albray again, his expression was sympathetic, although he was at a loss for what to say.

You know, even if I had survived this place, I would still be dead. He tried to make light of my hurt. *I think that a large part of the problem is that you’re exhausted. I should leave you be and let you rest.*

I nodded, a little irked that he didn’t even think to question why his death would upset me, or perhaps he knew and wanted to avoid the subject.

I waved him to leave and turned away to hide the tears welling anew.

Albray was quiet for a time, but I knew he hadn't left. *Are your feelings the reason you won't carry the stone with you?*

I shot around to face him, a little startled by the accuracy of his claim. 'It seems you can read my thoughts anyway.' I brushed the tears from my face quickly. I had made it fairly plain how I felt and if he didn't feel anything for me, I wasn't going to make a fool of myself any longer.

Albray seemed to feel a little awkward, as if juggling some weighty decision in his mind. *The power of the stone works both ways, you realise.*

Not for me, I grumbled, although admittedly I hadn't really tried to master this psychic skill I was supposed to have.

Only for you, he corrected adamantly, and then he seemed annoyed at himself for pushing the issue. *It is not for me to thrust psychic experience upon you, only your will can get you what you want in this world.. .* Albray seemed to want to say more, but decided against it. *Would you dismiss me for a while?* he requested out of the blue.

My first thought was that he wanted to escape this emotional discussion; he had warned Ashlee that when it came to affairs of the heart he was useless. Then it occurred to me that he was still pining for his priestess, who, he'd confessed to Ashlee, was the love of his life. 'If that is what you wish.' When he nodded, I retrieved the stone.

You will keep the stone near, in case you need me? he asked rather timidly.

I gave a nod, although I could hardly wear the amulet in case Albray discovered how deep my feelings for him had really become. I dismissed him and immediately placed the stone aside. 'What is it about humans that makes us want more desperately that which we cannot have?'

I'd had enough soul-searching for one day and my bed beckoned. I turned off my study light. I shoved the stone underneath my pillow, so that it would be close at hand but not actually touching my person as I lay down to sleep.

For someone so tired, my mind was awlirl. Every sound outside my tent now seemed amplified, although there was not much to hear. A few people were still laughing and talking in the mess tent. The moaning sound of camels carried on the breeze from afar and then I heard shuffling

footsteps that stopped just outside the tent's entrance—maybe two or three people.

I sat up to listen harder. 'Is someone there?'

'It is only your faithful servants, goddess,' came the reply, which shocked me to the core.

Goddess! I moved to the flap and opened it, whereupon Akbar and his two associates bowed low to the ground before me. 'Please get up,' I begged them in a whisper, and although slow to comply, they did. 'Can I help you in some way?'

'It is we who are here to help you,' Akbar informed me. 'You are a daughter of Isis and we are sworn to protect you.'

'I don't need protection,' I emphasised, 'as you clearly saw this afternoon.'

Akbar disagreed. 'The very fact that you are in the employ of C & M warrants additional precautions.'

'Why do you say that?' I was curious to hear his reason. 'You are in the same company's employ.'

'But I am not a daughter of Isis,' he argued.

'I would appreciate it if you would stop calling me that.' I feared that even our whispered voices would carry far in the silence of the night. Admittedly I was interested to know more, but my brain was already filled to overflowing for today. 'Please, could we meet and discuss this tomorrow afternoon, perhaps?'

'Of course,' Akbar agreed. 'A good night to you, princess.' He bowed.

It was an effort not to roll my eyes in frustration. 'Just call me Dr Montrose if you must persist in addressing me by a formal title,' I suggested. 'I'll see you tomorrow.'

I entered my tent and made for my bed, but when I did not hear the men move off, I stuck my head out the tent flap to see them all seated with their backs to me.

'Dismissed, guys,' I added, hoping they'd take the hint.

'You cannot dismiss us from our duty,' Akbar said respectfully.

'Then make like spies, and watch over me from afar.' I pointed to the horizon.

'Understood,' Akbar conceded, and I immediately closed the flap.

Again I heard no movement, and I really started to lose my cool. ‘I said—’ I lifted the flap and to my great amazement, I found them gone. ‘Christ, what a night!’

I threw myself on the bed, and landing on my stomach my hand swept under the pillow to meet with the stone I had hidden there. Where did Albray go when I dismissed him, I wondered? Where did he go when I didn’t dismiss him? All I really knew about his life was where he’d met his end. He seemed to know everything about me and I knew nothing about him. ‘Not a very fair exchange,’ I considered. ‘I don’t even know his last name.’ It seemed Albray made an art of not giving too much away about himself. ‘But why?’ I pondered, unable to resist fiddling with the stone at my fingertips.

I had never before had a dream that I felt so completely involved in. Nor had I ever been so aware of dreaming in full, glorious, technicolour! The vibrancy of the provincial landscape through which I walked engaged me totally. I could smell all the sweet scents of spring flowers in the fields, hear the birds, feel the sun on my skin.

Beyond the fields, I came to a garden with a lovely fountain in the centre. Seated on the surrounds of the water feature was a very beautiful woman. Her robes were scarlet red and her long black hair fell straight to the knees of her long, sleek body. Before her knelt a knight—my heart sank when I realised it was my knight.

I was not close enough to hear their words to each other, but clearly Albray was pouring his heart out to this woman who stroked his hair with comforting gestures.

This is Lillet, I acknowledged, and looking down at my own form I saw that I was still dressed in the dirty jeans and shirt I’d worn today. *How could I ever hope to compete with such a goddess?*

Clearly my thoughts had resonance here, for Albray looked at me, obviously horrified by my presence. ‘Mia?’ He stood and let go of his confidante’s hands.

I did not wait to be humiliated further. I turned and ran back into the fields beyond the garden. I heard Albray calling after me, but still I did not halt. I just wanted to wake up, but how did I accomplish that wish?

Albray suddenly appeared before me and colliding with him brought me to a halt. 'Now that you are here, please don't go,' he said. 'I really want to speak with you.'

'Albray, you're real!' I patted his chest and shoulders with my hands, unable to believe it. Needless to say, my sadness vanished in my joy at this revelation. 'I can touch you.' I laughed nervously about my dream come true. 'I am dreaming, aren't I?'

Albray nodded, amused by my excitement.

'And are you dreaming too?' I wondered.

'No,' he uttered, easing a hand behind my neck to encourage my face closer to his. 'I'm living.'

Our lips met and I died with delight.

A crashing sound woke me, and when I saw Andre I moaned in protest at being dragged back to reality. Now I wake up, I thought, noting the irony in my present situation. I then had the horrible realisation that I held Albray's stone in my hand. I quickly placed it on the table by the bed—my knight had probably perceived my little fantasy about him and I just wanted to die.

'Sorry. I didn't want to wake you.' Andre finished sliding my breakfast tray onto my desk. 'You sounded like you were having too much fun asleep,' he chuckled.

I felt my cheeks burn with embarrassment. 'Really? I don't remember anything erotic.' This wasn't a lie—it was just a kiss that I didn't even get to finish. So why could I not wipe the smile off my face?

'He's a lucky man, this new boyfriend of yours.' Andre clearly didn't believe my drawing-a-blank routine. 'What did you say his name was?'

'Albray,' I informed, as I searched for a second name to give him. 'Devere.' That would do.

'*Albray Devere?*' He sounded most surprised. 'That is a legendary name in France.'

'Really? Why?'

'Albray Devere was a famous thirteenth-century knight who came to the aid of the Cathars at the besieged fort of Montségur.'

'Did he die there?' I asked. If he did, it certainly wasn't my Albray... anyway, the name was just a fabrication.

‘Apparently not.’ Andre was enjoying filling me in for a change. ‘It is said that he aided two women to escape from the fortress the night before it was to be handed over to the crusaders who fought for the church. It is said that the women were carrying holy relics, which they speedily delivered to places of safekeeping.’

‘What kind of relics?’

Andre shrugged. ‘Some say they carried the genealogical charts of the Royal House of Judah, which had been stolen from the Roman authorities before they had the chance to destroy them. Other accounts say it was the Holy Grail, or the Ark of the Covenant, that was whisked away from Montségur that night.’

Why was it that every intrigue in history seemed to lead back to the Holy Grail? ‘Well, obviously I am not dating that Albray Devere,’ I posed in jest. ‘Thanks for the tale nonetheless. I guess I’d better hit the books.’ I stood and scratched my head.

‘I’m off to Sharm el-Sheikh to meet up with our delivery of mysterious powder,’ Andre advised, and I snapped out of my daze. ‘I’ll be back early tomorrow. Do you need anything from civilisation?’

I shook my head. ‘I came well prepared, but thanks all the same, and have fun.’ I gave him a wave as he departed.

‘And if you have any trouble—’

‘I won’t have any trouble with Akbar,’ I assured, waving him to go and stop worrying. ‘I’ll be just fine...believe me.’

I was very excited to be returning to Ashlee’s world today—I could study and be with Albray at the same time.

Yes, I was obsessed, and even more so since my dream last night. His presence hung over me—a sweet blessing that made me smile each time I acknowledged its existence. ‘If only it had been real.’ I found myself drifting back into Albray’s enfolding arms, instead of finding my place in the text. ‘If I can at least touch him in my dreams I must be content with that, for it is far better than not at all.’ However, it was not truly Albray in my dreams, just my ideal of him and what I’d like him to say or do. ‘But I have never had so fine a dream before,’ I argued with myself, and then panicked. ‘What if it never happens again?’

I reached for my tea. The argument was too distressing, so I gave up on it. 'Now,' I inhaled deeply and out again, 'where was I?'

I had come to the end of Susan Devere's account of the incident at the Arsenal Library, and the tale resumed with Ashlee fleeing Paris.

LESSON 12

PROMISES

FROM THE TRAVEL JOURNALS OF MRS ASHLEE DEVERE

I had no idea what my plan was. Travelling as I was, a noble lady, made me too damned easy to track, although I had enough money to pay the coach to take us all the way to the Mediterranean.

‘Our guise is betraying us.’ I finally voiced my concerns to Nanny, who’d been silent beside me whilst I thought through our best route to the Sinai.

What did I tell you in the beginning? Albray appeared on the seat opposite me; I had not dismissed him, nor would I unless he specifically requested it.

‘What does your spirit friend say about our situation?’ Nanny asked, without so much as glancing up from her knitting.

Albray and myself were stunned. ‘Do you see him, Nanny?’

Nanny shook her head. ‘I’ve heard you speaking with someone from time to time.’ She glanced around the carriage. ‘I didn’t realise it was a *he*, however,’ she said in a tone of disapproval. ‘Still, I don’t suppose he can do you too much harm, such as he is.’

I laughed, as did Albray. ‘Dear Nanny.’ I kissed her cheek and then sat back to answer her question. ‘Albray thinks we should travel a bit more incognito.’

‘If he is talking about becoming peasants that would be easier said than done,’ Nanny scoffed. ‘Poor people travel by cheap and dangerous means, and I’ll not have you placed in harm’s way.’

Miss Granville, you are already in harm’s way, Albray explained, *and I’m afraid you are going to have little choice in your change of circumstance as Chiara would like to claim her favour now.*

‘Now?’ I was surprised. ‘But we are nowhere near Italy.’

The gypsy witch appeared beside Albray, concern written across her face. *Something terrible has happened to my people*, she said, using a mix of Italian and what I suspected was Romany—which I hadn't studied, but as the gypsies moved around a lot, their tongue borrowed words from many other European languages. Clearly, Chiara was very upset.

'Be calm,' I said. 'I need you to tell me your troubles slowly, and in Italian preferably.'

Chiara nodded. *My people seldom venture this far west. Gypsy traders are not so appreciated in the midlands of France. Not a mile down the road, you will come to a caravan of women, and you must help them! Our men have been taken. I don't know the circumstances*, she sobbed. *You must help them. I did not expect to ask so big a favour in return for my services, but if you do this for Chiara*, she pleaded, placing a hand over her heart, *I shall vow to you a lifetime of service.*

That's a very generous offer indeed, Albray granted.

'But this will surely delay our quest,' I said, speaking aloud.

Delays can prove beneficial in my experience. Albray didn't seem too worried. *If you fall into the company of gypsies, it will provide you with the perfect cover and you could have no better guides if travelling on the cheap.*

'Fear not, Chiara, I will do what I can for your family,' I assured her, noting Nanny's surprise at my words. Chiara began blessing me in several dialects. 'No need to thank me, as it is clearly the best solution for all of us.'

'So what have we decided?' Nanny was quick to ask, sounding a little wary.

'I think I might surprise you with this one, Nanny.' I patted her hand. 'But not to fear, all shall be made clear within the hour.' I smiled broadly at Albray, rather excited by the prospect of sampling gypsy life.

I could see Nanny was very curious, as I moved from the left to right window looking out for the caravan, but often gypsies had the reputation of being thieves, witches and devil worshippers, so I thought it best to just let the scenario unfold. Nanny was a good judge of character and could make up her own mind about Chiara's kin.

When I had the coach pull up beside the caravan, I laughed at Nanny's doubtful expression. 'I made a promise to someone that helped us escape the Chateau De Vere. I am bound to return this favour,' I explained and,

although Nanny was worried, she trusted me and did not question my course of action.

As I climbed out of my carriage, I was struck by two things: firstly, by how surprised these people were that I had stopped to speak with them, and secondly by how colourful and cheerful their attire was—their bleak expressions were in distinct contrast.

Unlike Chiara's drab attire, her descendants had obviously travelled and traded more broadly, for these women displayed a kind of Oriental splendour, with gold coins woven into their dark masses of hair and around their necks and breasts. Their skirts were striped and spotted in vibrant clashes of colour. Bright colours and patterns featured in their shirts, shawls and the scarves that were bound about their heads. Chiara had a very handsome clan indeed.

'Are voi nella difficoltà, signore?' I asked them if they were in trouble, hoping they still employed Italian as well as their native Romany. I also wondered where all the men of the band were. *'Where sono i vostri uomini?'*

They all stared at me and I wondered if I should try French. Then the eldest woman rose from her chair and replied in Italian: 'What concern is that of yours, my lady?'

'Well,' I took a deep breath, and as I was beholden to no one any more, I thought I'd try something novel and tell the truth, 'I owe Chiara a favour and she requested I stop and help you in return for her service to me.'

There were many gasps from those present, and the women muttered quietly among themselves.

'A mystic.' The old woman was pleasantly surprised and quite confident about her claim. 'If Chiara has sent you, you must be more than you appear to be, for we have very great troubles indeed.'

'Hmmm.' I looked at our coach driver who was fidgeting impatiently. 'If I may impose on your hospitality, ladies, I shall be glad to hear your woes and do what I can.'

'Any soul sent to me by Chiara is welcome in my wagon,' the old gypsy confirmed. 'My name is Chavi Choron. Chiara was my grandmother.'

'Pleased to meet you Chavi. I am Ashlee—' I paused before announcing my second name, 'Winston.' I decided to take Nanny's second

name as that was safest. ‘Miss,’ I added, so that no one would wonder where my other half was. ‘Unload our luggage, thank you, driver,’ I instructed. ‘We shall not require your services further.’ I paid the coachman double to forget he’d ever seen us and he seemed satisfied with the arrangement. He turned his coach around and headed back to Paris.

As I entered the circle that the horse-drawn caravans formed, the women and children of the clan were smiling shyly at me in greeting. Chavi introduced us to every person there—so many incredibly exotic names whizzed past my ears that, if I didn’t have the ability to read minds, I would have been hard pressed to remember them all. From what I could assess, there were about four extended families in the band.

I introduced my ‘mama’, Beatrice Winston, and they all repeated the foreign name in awe. Nanny was won over from this point on. When she learned that a number of the children present were orphans and in need of tending, Nanny Beat realised she’d just walked into paradise.

I left Nanny with the children and followed Chavi to some chairs that were by her wagon. The old woman’s seat had many cushions and a table was between her seat and mine. As I sat Chavi asked, ‘And who is the knight that comes with you?’

Albray laughed. *It seems we have another mystic in our midst.*

I looked to Chavi and she wore a cheeky grin, as did I. ‘He is Albray... he is the one who put me in touch with your grandmother.’

‘Chiara wove a spell for you,’ Chavi stated more than asked. Then she went into trance and for a moment she wore a grave expression. ‘You are running from love...but it will catch up with you.’ The old gypsy sounded happy about the latter.

‘We are here to speak about your problems, Chavi,’ I reminded her kindly, so as not to insult her obvious talent. ‘Tell me, where are your men? Chiara said that you don’t usually travel so far west into France.’

I was told that it was true, they usually confined their trading within southern France and Lorraine.

Chavi had a grandson, Cingar, who was widely known to play the violin so passionately he could bewitch any woman’s heart. The Duchess of Orleans heard the rumour, so her husband, Gascon de Guise, summoned Cingar to his court for the duke to examine the truth of this claim. As the duke had never taken kindly to gypsies, Cingar knew it was a trap and yet

could not resist such a challenge, for such occasions became the heart of legend and folklore. Cingar was also the captain of this band of gypsies, and where one member of the clan went, they all went.

‘So Cingar did bewitch the duchess,’ I presumed.

‘Completely,’ Chavi said, both proudly and ruefully. ‘In a fit of jealousy the duke had Cingar arrested.’

‘On what charge?’ I frowned, drawing a blank. Yet the answer was so obvious.

‘Heresy, of course.’ Chavi was surprised I hadn’t guessed. ‘The duke said that Cingar’s playing was beyond pure mortal talent and that he must have made a pact with the devil.’

I rolled my eyes as the charge was so typical of a jealous aristocrat. ‘Have we not come out of the Dark Ages yet?’

‘That is not the worst of it,’ Chavi continued. ‘The same night as my grandson was arrested, the duke’s son fell ill and de Guise accused us of cursing his boy. Our men were all seized by the duke’s soldiers and he has threatened to kill them all if his boy dies.’

‘So, why are your caravans on the road to Paris?’ I wondered.

Chavi smiled broadly, as if I should know why. ‘I was told by an anonymous spirit that I would find our saviour on the road from Paris to Sens.’

‘How long have you been waiting for me?’ I was hoping that the duke’s son had not died already.

‘We’ve just arrived after two days of travel.’ Chavi also appeared worried for the boy.

‘Then there is no time to waste.’ I stood and looked about at all the idle horses. ‘Give me a horse and a guide to Orleans and I shall bring your men back within the week.’ I looked at Albray to see what he thought, but all he did was wink in approval.

Chavi went into a trance, and then told me: ‘I believe it is the truth. Rumer.’ Chavi called for her grand-daughter, Cingar’s sister. ‘Prepare two horses and provisions. You shall ride with Miss Winston.’ Chavi winked at me and I wasn’t too sure if that was to set me at my ease, or to imply that she knew Winston was not my true name.

When I stopped to consider in more detail what I proposed to do, fear grew in my gut, and I looked at Albray who stood shaking his head at me.

Between your talents and my own, what is there that we cannot achieve?

I smiled, considering it a fair question. *I hope we are not about to find out.*

FROM THE HONEYMOON JOURNAL OF LADY SUSAN DEVERE

Today was one of the most exciting days of my life.

It was like something straight out of one of Ashlee's stories. I am so pleased to have thought to keep an account of our pursuit. My hope is that one day, when this whole mess is unravelled, Ashlee will be able to laugh at the merry chase that she led us on.

And I must comment at this point for your benefit, dear Ash, that every day I pass in the company of the Devere brothers, the more fond I become of them both. I fear you have too harshly judged your husband's motives, for I have never seen a man so single-minded in his purpose. I see clearly how his mind is absorbed at every waking moment with thoughts of you; he will have no peace until we find you safe and well.

My husband, on the other hand, was just this morning in the foulest of moods and completely exasperated with the pursuit of you, dear sister.

There we were in a carriage, bowling along the road out of town, and we hadn't seen any of Paris yet—you can just imagine what my lord thought of that!

'I want to know why your wife is running from you, Earnest,' James demanded. 'I know there is something I'm not being told.'

Mr Devere and I looked at each other, at a loss as to where to start and wondering how much James needed to know, when another carriage passed us on its way back to Paris. It captured my brother's interest immediately.

'What is the matter, Mr Devere?' I asked, as he was so preoccupied.

'That was her coach,' he claimed. In a rush for information, Mr Devere stuck his head out the window and ordered our coachman to turn us around with all speed and catch the coach that had just passed us by.

'That's a bit of a long shot, don't you think?' James was quite put out that we were doubling back for no good reason. 'How could you know for sure that was our sister's conveyance?'

‘Your brother’s instincts have proven excellent so far,’ I reasoned, as the carriage turned around. I served Mr Devere a look to let him know he had better be right about this.

‘I am absolutely certain,’ he stated.

Mr Devere later told me how it was that he could be so sure—the explanation started with yesterday.

We had traced Ashlee to her accommodation in Paris. Molier had cunningly asked his assistant to inform Mrs Devere—on the first day she was at the library—that, as a safety precaution for the holy archive, she was required to sign the guest book and give a contact address in Paris. The woman who had let the rooms to Ashlee had seen her leave in a carriage, but her tenant had left no clue as to where she was bound. Mr Devere kissed the lady’s hand in parting, and had extracted from the brief contact a precise image of the carriage in which Ashlee had left Paris.

It seems Devere’s talents had grown stronger since Ashlee’s departure, for rather than being weakened by her absence, each day he achieved some new marvel. So perhaps the true source of his power was not just the act of making love to Ashlee, but also the love she evoked in him.

Which brings me back to the excitement and drama of how we came to be in hot pursuit of another carriage.

‘Earnest, I demand that you stop goading our coachman. You’re endangering all our lives!’ Lord Devere put his foot down.

Our brother reluctantly stuck his upper body out the coach window, and as he conversed with the driver a coach wheel collided with a rock. Earnest disappeared out the window, and the driver was catapulted out of his seat and onto the side of the road.

Fortunately, Mr Devere had kept hold of the luggage rack on the roof, from which he now dangled and as the coach was speeding along he was unable to find a foothold.

‘Nobody ever listens to me.’ My lord sprang into action. He opened the coach door and reached out to haul his brother inside the carriage. Before Mr Devere had even drawn breath, my Lord Devere was out the window, on the roof and into the driver’s seat. He had a bit of a time getting hold of the reins, and even when he had them in hand, the horses were at a charge and not easy to steady.

Just as we felt the horses finally submitting to my husband's will and we had breathed a sigh of relief, the pace of our passage picked up again.

Mr Devere called out the window to his brother to find out what was happening, when he spotted the coach up ahead. 'James is a good man,' he told me grinning from ear to ear, and sat back in his seat, relieved to have achieved his goal.

'That he is,' I agreed, 'good enough to deserve the truth from us.' I felt guilty keeping him in the dark about so many things.

Lord Devere called the other coach to a stop and when the coachman did as he asked, my husband finally brought our transport to a halt alongside. Mr Devere was out the door like a flash and off to question the coachman.

My lord jumped from the driver's seat to assist me out of the carriage. He was windblown from his ordeal and there was colour in his cheeks and a large smile on his face. 'That was rather more fun than I expected,' he confessed. 'Though I hope our coachman hasn't been too badly injured.'

'For such a reserved gentleman, it seems you have a hidden audacious streak, Lord Devere...that was frightfully gallant.' I kissed my husband, for I was very proud of his heroics.

Although my lord was enjoying my admiration, we became aware that Mr Devere was getting rather agitated with the driver of the other coach.

'Look, I know that you transported my wife out of Paris,' Mr Devere was saying.

'I told you my fare was not a Mrs Devere, just a mademoiselle and her mother,' the coachman barked, getting ready to move on.

'Miss Granville.' Mr Devere attempted to guess the identity of the mademoiselle.

'No! Now if you don't mind I—'

'Miss Winston,' I called, and the coachman calmed a little when he saw me. That was the thing with Frenchmen—they had far more patience with foreign women than with foreign men, especially if that woman also spoke the language.

'That's a bit more like it,' he admitted, somewhat vaguely.

'A bit more like it, or exactly it?' Mr Devere demanded to know, at his wit's end.

‘I don’t remember!’ the coachman insisted, until my lord held up a bag full of gold francs.

‘Does this jog your memory?’ Lord Devere jangled the pouch to make it clear it contained many coins.

The coach driver’s eyes opened wide and his memory was miraculously restored. ‘I left the mademoiselle late yesterday at the gypsy camp further down the road.’

‘Gypsies!’ My Lord Devere’s worried expression returned, as he tossed the bag of coin to our informant in payment.

‘Then we need to move quickly,’ resolved Mr Devere, moving to take up the coachman’s position on our carriage.

‘If it’s all the same to you, little brother, I’ll drive until we recover our coachman,’ Lord Devere suggested. ‘I assume we’d all prefer to remain able-bodied and in good health?’

I took advantage of the novelty of the situation and rode up front with Lord Devere as we returned to our original direction and searched for our coachman.

‘There is something I have to tell you about our dear sister.’ I tested the waters. I had never seen my husband in such light spirits, so I guessed now was the best opportunity to bring everything out in the open.

‘I am listening,’ he prompted, still smiling.

‘Ashlee is different to most people,’ I began awkwardly.

‘Well, I can honestly say I have never met the like of her.’ He did not sound entirely pleased about that.

‘You know that my aunt, Lady Charlotte, is famed for certain talents she possesses.’ I thought suggestive hints might work better than a straight confession.

He looked at me, his good cheer waning. ‘I don’t believe in psychics.’

‘Well, I dare say you don’t believe in Buddha either, but that does not mean he never existed.’ The comment was a little shocking to him, but it did get my point across nicely. ‘There are many unexplained mysteries in this world, Lord Devere, but denying their existence will never further our understanding or make them disappear.’

Lord Devere did not look happy, but he nodded to concede my point. ‘Are you going to tell me that our sister is a psychic?’ He glanced at me,

awaiting my answer.

‘It is a little more complicated than that. You see...’ I had to take a deep breath for this one. ‘Um, it seems our sister has awakened these talents in Mr Devere as well.’

‘What!’ My lord was astonished by the claim.

‘And that’s not all,’ I warned, but was saved from continuing the confession alone when I spotted our coachman sitting on the side of the road. He was nursing his head, but was obviously not seriously injured.

Lord Devere pulled the carriage to a stop, so the driver could once again take the reins. ‘How long have you known about this?’

‘Our brother only told me after Ashlee disappeared.’ I saw my beloved’s jaw tense in anger. ‘Please, my lord, your brother is very scared and saddened by all that is unfolding around him. I fear that he is in greater trouble than he will even disclose to me.’

My husband took a deep breath, and patted my hand to reassure me that he was not angry, and that he would be diplomatic.

I felt lightened of a great load by the time we arrived at the gypsy camp. The air had been cleared between the Devere brothers, and even though they were still at odds in their beliefs, my lord had resolved to continue helping his brother if only to see where this little adventure led. Still, Mr Devere would not discuss the brotherhood to which he and their father belonged. And, rather than feeling overlooked, my husband was extremely glad he’d been left out of the club that was now causing his younger brother so much grief. My lord didn’t ask Mr Devere to prove his claim of psychic talent. I felt that perhaps my husband didn’t want his scepticism overturned, at least not today.

It took a while to establish what language to converse with the gypsies in, but after a couple of attempts we all settled on Italian. My Italian was a little better than that of my male companions and the women seemed more disposed to conversing with me, so I urged Mr Devere to allow me to do the questioning.

It was the elder of the band who spoke with me; she led me to a caravan and sat me down on one of the seats by the table there. Mr Devere followed us, and as there was no seat for him, he stood behind me and placed his hands on the back of my chair to listen in and try to follow the

conversation. The old gypsy insisted that she hadn't seen any mademoiselle, but invited us to join them for the evening meal as it was growing late.

Mr Devere shook his head; he wanted to keep moving and was already halfway to the carriage.

I thanked the old woman and as I rose she gripped my hands and closed her eyes for a moment. 'You are a good friend to this woman you seek,' she told me with a reassuring smile. 'All will be well for her, and you.' She let go of my hands.

I hadn't had my fortune told in a long while and I was pleased to have good news. 'Shall I find her, do you think?'

The gypsy woman shook her head and smiled warmly. 'How can you find what is not lost?'

I felt I caught her meaning and was amused. 'It is true, Ashlee is never lost. Perhaps I should have asked, would she find us?'

The old woman nodded to concede that was a more apt question. 'All in divine order,' she replied as I wandered toward the carriage from which both my companions now beckoned.

'You gave up very easily, Mr Devere.' I seated myself beside my husband in the carriage, feeling a little frustrated. 'Could we not have taken up the offer of dinner? We might have learned something. Now we have run out of leads.'

Mr Devere ignored me and motioned the coachman closer to have a quiet word with him. 'Take us to Orleans.'

The coachman looked as if he had had enough for one day, but he confirmed the order and acted on it.

'My wife was sitting in that chair,' Mr Devere motioned toward where I'd been sitting with the

old gypsy, 'when she made the decision to go to Orleans.'

'Why Orleans?' I wondered. 'That seems a strange route to Italy.' Privately, I thought that Ashlee would head for the exotic Eastern lands, as Hereford had been so fond of them.

'She's on a rescue mission,' he confessed, very concerned, and a little sad. 'I sense there is a male travelling with her whom she trusts implicitly.' He looked to me for confirmation.

At first I was stumped by the suggestion. 'Ashlee does not have a lover, if that is what you are suggesting.' I dismissed his foul implication.

‘If she did, I would know of it, I assure you.’

Mr Devere appeared thankful and ashamed. ‘There is somebody, I know it!’ He begged me to think harder. ‘A friend, perhaps?’

I strained to think, but outside of my family there was no one. ‘No,’ I assured him, ‘men do not interest Ashlee—’ And there was the answer! I clicked my fingers, having solved the puzzle. ‘It’s a spirit.’

Mr Devere knew I was right and smiled, relieved to have an alternative to the more obvious lover scenario that he’d envisaged. My Lord Devere, however, was distressed.

‘Have you both gone mad?’ he growled. ‘Just listen to yourselves. I think you are making this all up as we go along, and Mrs Devere is really back in Paris.’

‘I would not play games with her life,’ Mr Devere assured his brother. ‘I am happy to go on alone. I’d move faster on horseback.’

I feared that this was the excuse Lord Devere had been waiting for in order to pull out of the chase and return to Paris.

‘I am hardly going to pull out now. All this *mystique* is so intriguing.’ He grinned his sceptic’s grin. ‘We should soon, however, find lodgings for the night and something to eat.’

Clearly, Mr Devere would have kept going if given the choice. He looked out the window and nodded.

‘She’ll have to rest too, Earnest.’ Lord Devere knew what his brother was thinking.

‘My husband is right,’ I said, fearing that Mr Devere would take off on his own and then we’d never find him or Ashlee! ‘Ashlee may have superhuman talent, but she does not have superhuman stamina.’

I do.

I could have sworn I heard the thought resonate from Mr Devere’s mind, but he looked at me and forced a smile.

‘We could all use the rest,’ he said, most unconvincingly.

FROM THE TRAVEL JOURNALS OF MRS ASHLEE DEVERE

I had never experienced anything quite so exhausting as the ride to Orleans on horseback. Rumer and I only stopped to eat and answer nature’s call. We slept a little when we lost the moonlight and could no longer see the road.

For two women travelling alone at night it was safer to keep moving at good speed, but as I lay down in a field under the stars that night, I did not fear for my person for I knew my knight was keeping watch.

Fearful for her brother and kinsmen, Rumer kept me moving and encouraged me on when I thought I would drop. I felt a little ashamed that one day in the saddle could deplete my energy so badly, or perhaps being on the run was starting to take its toll. I really longed for a big hot tub and somewhere to relax—read a good book perhaps!

As we approached Orleans, I felt Albray join with me, and his strength and vigour aided to uphold my weary form. He spoke to me in my thoughts as we rode, suggesting how we might handle the forthcoming audience, if indeed the duke would agree to see me.

Upon approach to the duke's estate in Orleans I stopped to tidy myself and gain the right frame of mind. I was a nineteen-year-old girl who held no diplomatic power whatsoever. What had I been thinking when I'd agreed to do this?

Our plan will work, Albray assured me as I mounted my horse to ride the final leg to my quest.

I'm betting my life on it. I hadn't come all this way to lose faith in my own ability and Albray's—I was going to do this come hell or high water. 'Shall we go fetch your brother?' I asked Rumer, who smiled broadly and took off ahead of me.

She was feisty and fun to travel with. Full of energy and sound logic, Rumer was a year younger than I was and far more worldly. Her hair hung in long masses of dark curls and her large dark brown eyes added to the animation of her confident character. If Cingar was anywhere near as alluring in appearance as his sister, women probably fell in love with more than just his violin playing.

With her big flared skirts, Rumer rode her horse in the male fashion, which I could not hope to do in my frock without baring more than was wise. What I wouldn't have done for a pair of men's trousers!

When Gascon de Guise was informed that an English woman had come to plead for the lives of the imprisoned Italian gypsies, he must have been intrigued to say the least.

I was led into the duke's room of court and after thanking the duke for his time and consideration I was asked to explain myself.

‘Your grace,’ I began, ‘I have been commissioned by the relatives of your prisoners to ascertain what evidence your lordship has to verify the claim that witchcraft was responsible for your son’s ailments.’

The duke was astonished. ‘Are you a lawyer, Miss Winston?’ he said in a very condescending tone, as if to imply that it was impossible.

‘My area of expertise is not law, your grace, it is witchcraft,’ I informed. ‘It is an academic study. My governess was the Dowager Countess, Lady Charlotte Cavandish. Perhaps you’ve heard of her?’

‘Of course I have heard of her! That name is legendary in France.’ He seemed insulted and yet heartened at one and the same time. ‘The Countess Cavandish would have been able to tell me what was ailing my boy, whereas my surgeons have proven useless. Every day he grows sicker and sicker...damn those gypsies!’

‘Please, your grace, the most unbelievable circumstances have led me to your door during this grave time. Perhaps it was fated that I see your child? I am very knowledgeable in both the black arts and the sciences.’

The duke seemed ready to try anything, and I ascertained from his light-body that he was not an evil man by nature—or at least he did not think of himself as such. ‘If you restore my boy’s health I will release the gypsies. But if he dies,’ he fixed me with steely blue eyes ablaze with fear and hatred just waiting to vent itself on someone, ‘I shall have them all shot and you shall give the order.’

Albray? In my mind I began to panic.

You’re doing fine, there’s nothing to worry about.

That’s easy for you to say, you’re dead already!

De Guise dismissed me and instructed me to follow his steward. ‘The gypsy witch must wait under guard for you. I shall not have her near my son.’

I didn’t feel comfortable about that, considering the duke’s low regard for Rumer’s race. ‘This girl is in my care. Do I have your assurance that she will not be harmed?’ I had no clue whether the word of Gasgon de Guise was worth anything anyway.

‘No harm will come to her,’ the duke assured me, ‘provided you cure my son.’

This deal just gets worse and worse. I decided to retreat quickly before the stakes became any higher.

The chief steward led me to the head maidservant, who we met at the main staircase. The middle-aged woman looked pale and drawn, as did the steward—as had the duke for that matter. I assumed it was just the stress of the little master’s illness that was causing the muddy patches in the head centres of all these people’s light-bodies, for their dis-ease was plain to me.

I asked the maidservant to outline the boy’s symptoms.

‘At first it was just a headache,’ she explained, nursing her own head which was obviously ailing her. ‘His condition degenerated rapidly into spasms of nausea and extreme general prostration. He complains of a burning throat...his hands and feet are icy cold. I fear we shall lose him to dehydration before long.’

In the young master’s withdrawing room we found the manservant of Master de Guise keeled over and vomiting into a woodbin. He too had muddy patches superimposing the higher centres of his light-body, but his disease had extended down through his stomach as well.

The true cause of the illness was soon clear to me. I smelt it as soon as I entered the young master’s chambers. ‘Fresh paint,’ I eyed the deadly walls, ‘of lethal green.’

‘The curse is spreading!’ The maidservant panicked.

‘This is not the work of a curse.’ I gripped both her shoulders to calm her. ‘The illness stems from the paint on these walls. Find me some liquid ammonia and I shall verify that,’ I instructed. ‘Tie a scarf over your nose and mouth, so that you do not breathe in any more of the paint fumes.’ I found my handkerchief and used it for that purpose. ‘Have that man taken to another room. He needs to be in darkness and silence...that will slow the poison.’

‘Poison!’ The maid was shocked.

‘Do as I tell you, quickly, for I suspect arsenic poisoning. Ammonia will turn this paint blue if it contains copper arsenate.’

‘But the master’s chambers...’ The maid began to weep and I made haste to the bedroom door. ‘Get some help up here to move these people!’ I ordered, shocking the maidservant into action. ‘No one comes into these rooms.’

There wasn’t much left of the six-year-old boy. The duke’s physicians had obviously used all their remedies on him, as the room reeked of the smell of medicine regurgitated.

‘Dear gods, what am I going to do?’ I knew what had caused the illness but I had no idea how to heal it, or if in fact it could be healed.

The answer is between your breasts.

I was startled by Albray’s brazen claim only as long as it took me to fathom his meaning. ‘The Star!’ I’d been carrying it for so long I’d forgotten it was even there. ‘The powder will cure him?’ I asked.

Completely, Albray assured. So, if you don’t want this to look like some sort of miracle, you’d better come up with some feasible explanation for his speedy recovery.

‘Chiara might know an antidote for arsenic poisoning,’ I suggested.

I shall return. Albray vanished.

I discarded the bedclothes, as everything in these rooms was likely to be permeated with the poison. ‘Hold on, little one.’ I bundled the child into my arms and went in search of another room, in any colour but green.

Albray returned with a list of ingredients to make an infusion, and I relayed the potion’s preparation to the head maidservant. It was only after much scientific study, later in life, that I realised the ingredients of Chiara’s brew were very high in iron, and that, by modern standards, was a perfect arsenic antidote.

It seemed to take an age for the servants to return with the broth, but in the interim the head steward reported he’d confirmed my suspicions—the ammonia had reacted on the paint as I had described and the findings were being reported to the duke.

‘Good old Nanny.’ I sat alone in the darkened room with the young master. It was only due to her suspicion of green that I’d known about the ammonia reaction to copper arsenate, for Nanny always carried a small vial of ammonia when shopping for fabric.

The young Master de Guise was fading fast. ‘Albray, perhaps we should not wait for the alibi?’

If you expose your talents, or that you carry the Star vial on your person, this situation is going to become much more complicated.

The boy’s breathing stopped altogether.

‘Please, not yet...’ I reached down into the neck of my gown to retrieve the Star vial.

Someone approaches, Albray warned me to refrain.

‘He’s dead, Albray!’ I was panicking. I needed time to form a strategy. How could I save any of us now? ‘We hesitated too long.’

Our plan is still sound, Albray assured me. Just make sure the maid does not learn of the boy’s passing.

To buy us time, I assumed, but when the door to the room opened and the maidservant entered I was forced to quickly address the situation. ‘Put it down over there. Thank you, and leave quietly,’ I instructed in a whisper, trying not to sound too desperate.

‘My duke requested that I look over the master and report on his condition.’ The weighty maid strode toward the bed.

‘Your report to the duke shall be far more positive if you give the infusion a half hour to do its work,’ I said.

The maid turned back to me. ‘I must say I feel much better for having had a cup of your brew, Miss Winston.’

‘It is an old gypsy remedy,’ I confessed.

The maid stared at me, horrified, but then shrugged and smiled. ‘Today has been a most enlightening day, miss.’ She curtsied to me, which she was certainly not required to do. ‘I shall speak with you in half an hour.’ She waddled to the door. ‘Can I fetch you some tea and something to eat?’

‘I’d greatly appreciate that.’ Despite my panic, I was starving.

‘A Last Supper perhaps?’ I said to Albray once we were alone. He stood out in the darkness, his spirit glistening like an angel. ‘Now what do you suggest we do?’

Give the child the powder, he prompted, as if that went without saying.

‘Surely it can do no good now...’ but I fished out the vial, eager to try anything at this point.

Just a small amount will do the trick, washed down with some of Chiara’s brew.

‘All right.’ I was doubtful, but I fetched a cup of broth.

I sprinkled about a tenth of the vial’s contents on the boy’s tongue and closed his mouth. I replaced my vial for safekeeping, and then raised the head of the deceased lad to trickle Chiara’s brew into his mouth. The next thing I knew the child was coughing and spluttering all over me.

‘Mademoiselle?’ The blue-eyed boy with dark angelic curls looked at me, wide-eyed and energetic, like he’d just woken from a sleep, rather than a fatal illness. The child looked over my shoulder. ‘*Monsieur?*’ Albray was

the only other being present. 'Is the sickness gone?' He was amazed to feel so well after days of torture.

'*Oui*, the sickness is gone.' I placed the broth in his hands. 'But I think you had best choose another colour for your chambers, or better still, choose new chambers altogether.'

'*Oui*,' the lad agreed, 'the new paint smelt rather bad.'

Albray and I got a chuckle out of that observation.

Even having achieved a miracle, my problems in Orleans were far from over.

Gasgon de Guise was, of course, extremely grateful for his son's return to health. He proclaimed, with his duchess in attendance, that I had undone the curse of the gypsies and he would set them free.

At this stage I wanted to point out that I had also proved that the illness was not the work of a gypsy curse. I refrained, however. The duke had been informed of my findings and if I made him out to be the fool, I would lose what favour I had gained by my service to his house. Instead, I decided it wiser to focus on and clarify our arrangement. I felt there was some sort of catch to what was being said by the duke. 'So all the gypsies, including Cingar and Rumer Choron, are now free to leave with me.'

The duke's gaze of approval turned chilly.

'The girl may go, but the fiddle player stays,' he informed me. 'I have plans for him on my plantation in Louisiana.'

'No, my lord, please. There is nothing to punish this man for,' his duchess appealed. 'His music invoked my passion,' she admitted willingly, 'my passion for you, my love...why won't you believe me?'

The duke would not look at his wife; clearly he felt her words stemmed from love and not justice.

'The only curse on this house is your jealousy!' said the duchess bitterly.

'Perhaps I shall hang the gypsy instead,' the duke replied coldly, whereby his wife reached her wit's end and stood. 'I love you, Gasgon de Guise, but I shall never forgive you if you condemn this man's genius simply because you envy his talent.' The duchess stormed toward me on her way out of the room. 'I would grant you anything for the service you have

done this house today, Mademoiselle Winston, but I fear my husband is a stubborn fool.'

'You shall not speak ill of me in front of a guest.' The duke attempted to reprimand his feisty lady.

'You have no honour,' she spat back at him as she left the room.

Any angles on this negotiation would be very welcome right now, I said to my knight on the quiet.

Just say exactly what I tell you to say and we ought to fare well, Albray told me and I opened myself to his suggestion.

'If I release Cingar, what compensation have I for the upheaval he has caused in this house?' The duke was sounding a little emotionally unstable. He could easily snap and decide to have me beheaded for defending his purported heretic.

'If I might suggest a different perspective, your grace,' I ventured humbly and he gave me his attention. 'If you had never invited Cingar to play in your house, he would never have offended you, that is true. *However...* he would not have been arrested and I would have had no reason to come to Orleans. Your son would have fallen sick to the poison on his walls in any case, and the entire household, including your grace, may have perished before the true cause of the illness was ascertained.'

The duke was grave as he mulled over my words, but to my great relief he eventually smiled. 'You are a very clever young woman, Mademoiselle Winston. And as you are so clever, I shall allow you to give me one good reason why I should release this gypsy. Are you in love with him?' The duke was clearly intrigued as to why I would risk my neck for such a man as Cingar.

'I am sorry to disappoint, your grace,' I blushed at his implication, for it was very romantic, 'but in truth I have never met the man.'

Tell the duke that you have a very good reason to release Cingar, but that it is for his ears alone. His guards must leave.

I'm not too sure that I want to be alone with his man, Albray, I inwardly protested as I repeated Albray's instruction to de Guise.

The duke appeared wary of my request, but curiosity got the better of him and he dismissed his guards.

Excellent, Albray confirmed. *Now undo your gown at the back.*

Forget it! I wasn't going to seduce a duke to get Cingar out of prison.

Show the duke your birthmark. Albray insisted I stop protesting and trust him. *The House of Guise is allied to the Grail kings. Do it, please.*

‘Your grace, I must beg your leave one moment. This is not what it seems.’

The duke appeared pleasantly surprised as he watched me unbutton my heavy velvet frock. ‘Perfect timing, mademoiselle,’ he commented, well disposed toward such a bargaining strategy. ‘My wife is lost to me for the present, so I...’

When I approached him and turned, the sight of my birthmark brought his banter to a stop. I began refastening my dress as I turned back to face the duke.

He was too awed to speak for a moment. ‘The mark of the House of du Lac,’ he uttered aghast. ‘Who are you really, Mademoiselle Winston?’

There was a knock at the door and the house steward entered. Thankfully I had rebuttoned my gown by the time he did. ‘There is a Monsieur Devere requesting an audience with your grace.’

My gasp just slipped out; that man had to be part bloodhound.

The duke clearly saw my distress. ‘Tell him to come back tomorrow.’

‘Beg your pardon, your grace, but Monsieur Devere is somewhat distressed. It seems he has lost a very pretty wife...an English woman,’ the steward looked at me, ‘of about twenty years, fair complexion, long auburn ringlets and green eyes.’ He looked back at the duke. ‘Have we seen anyone that fits that description, your grace?’

The duke raised his eyebrows in question at me.

‘No.’ I stated my preference. ‘I can explain everything,’ I added at Albray’s prompting.

‘No,’ the duke advised the steward, who seemed unimpressed by the lie he had to tell.

‘Very good.’ The steward took his leave.

‘Well, Mademoiselle Winston, or is it Madame Devere? It seems you suddenly have a whole lot more explaining to do.’

I could hardly believe the tale Albray had me spinning, and yet there was enough truth in it for me to sound convincing—all those years of telling stories to Susan suddenly came in very handy.

Because of my birthmark and my aforementioned occult connections, de Guise didn't have too much trouble believing that I was on a secret mission to the Holy Land for the Order de Sion. Or, rather, Albray had me telling the duke I had been sent by the Scottish chapter of the order—the Sangreal knighthood. I had no idea what I was talking about, but it seemed I knew the name of the secret brotherhood to which Mr Devere belonged, and Albray managed to work this little fact into our story. We said that I had been posing as Devere's wife for the mission, but that I suspected treachery—which was not entirely untrue. I told the duke I fled Devere's company upon reaching France to pursue my mission on my own.

'And what is your purpose in the Holy Land?' The duke was clearly dying to be made privy to my secret mission, for he was most intrigued by my yarn spinning.

Tell him you'll die before you disclose your mission.

I think that would be tempting fate, I argued.

He'll expect nothing less from one of the blood.

'I could tell you, your grace,' my determination hardened, 'but then I'd have to kill you...as I am sure you are well aware.'

Very nicely delivered, Albray commended me. *I'll make a knight of you yet.*

When the duke grinned broadly, I didn't show how unnerving it was for me. Was he going to commend or kill me?

'If you are on a secret mission for the said *Brotherhood*—' he stressed the word '—and suspect you have been betrayed by your protector, Mr Devere, I can hardly allow you to leave my house without assigning you some protection of my own.'

That would not be desirable, Albray stated the obvious. *Tell him you've been trained to protect yourself.*

'Your grace is very generous,' I moved to courteously decline, 'but I have been well trained to protect myself, and if the gypsies are freed—'

'Really!' the duke interrupted, intrigued by my claim and eager to avoid the subject of his prisoners. 'You are a trained killer, Lady du Lac?' The very idea brought a smile to his face, or perhaps it was his new name for me that tickled his fancy.

Christ, I do believe he is going to call our bluff! I panicked, and felt the heat of fear rising in my cheeks.

Not to worry, we can sustain our fabrication.

‘I am a swordsman myself,’ de Guise announced. ‘As are all the brothers.’

Yes! Albray cheered.

‘And a very good one, I am sure, your grace.’ I turned to my own tactics before this got out of hand. ‘However, I could not fight one of royal blood, especially one I have worked so hard this day to protect.’

‘Come, come, my dear...just a little fun, nothing too serious.’ De Guise stood, stubbornly resolved to a challenge. ‘You can fight my best swordsman if it makes you feel more comfortable. After all, how am I to be sure that you are not spinning me tall tales, and it is, in fact, Mr Devere who is telling me the truth?’

Fine with us. Albray was keen.

How on earth do I get myself into these things? As life was just one big entertainment to the aristocracy, I thought I’d better make sure I was going to achieve my objective if I was to meet this challenge. I certainly didn’t want it evolving into an extended game of cat and mouse. ‘If I prove I am competent enough to accomplish my own quest, your grace, will you then release Cingar?’

The duke frowned, perturbed at the mention of him, but not displeased with me. ‘Why is the gypsy so important to you?’

‘He is my guide to the Mediterranean,’ I explained. ‘He is vital to me achieving my objective.’

‘But I can supply an army to accompany you. I have boats—’

‘Your grace...’ I interrupted politely, ‘this is a *secret* mission. The gypsy band is the perfect cover. I must free their captain. I must have Cingar.’

The duke drew a deep breath, reluctant to acquiesce. ‘Such persuasion as you have must stem from otherworldly means.’

Although he said this in a complimentary fashion, I thought it best to refute his suggestion. ‘I am a woman of science, your grace. My skills in negotiation stem purely from training and education, I assure you.’ I wasn’t going to end up on a heresy charge. Albray had been right to insist that I avoid working any miracles here. De Guise may have been allied to the bloodline, but I knew his family was careful to preserve ties to the church as well.

‘Convince me with your skill and, by my vows to the bloodline, I could not deny you anything,’ he assured me.

I told you there was nothing to worry about. Albray moved with us, as the duke led me to a suitable arena.

‘I must leave Orleans today,’ I added, to be perfectly clear on this point.

‘On my finest horse,’ the duke promised generously and I was satisfied. If Albray was as fine a swordsman as he claimed to be—and my knight had not failed me to date—there was no reason to believe that we would not make a fine showing for the duke.

LESSON 13

COOPERATIVES

FROM THE HONEYMOON JOURNAL OF LADY SUSAN DEVERE

On the second morning of our journey to Orleans, Lord Devere and I were awoken in the early hours by the head maidservant at the hotel. She had heard from the coachman that Mr Devere had left our accommodation late last night, having purchased a saddled horse from a man in the salon downstairs.

It was my worst fear come to pass.

‘Did he leave an address of where he was headed?’ My Lord Devere was out of bed and ringing the bell for the servants to attend us.

‘He left this for you at the desk, my lord.’ The head maid handed the note to my husband, whereby she curtsied and departed as the house staff entered to dress us. ‘He has gone to visit Gascon de Guise, Duke of Orleans.’ Lord Devere raised both brows, intrigued. ‘He does not mention why, however.’

‘After our meeting with the gypsies our brother said something about a rescue mission.’ The notion did not preoccupy me long—there would be time to consider motives once we were on the move.

‘The Duc de Guise is not a man to be toyed with.’ My husband looked worried as he explained this in the carriage.

‘I feel certain that our sister would have considered the danger before pursuing any business with the duke.’ Or so I hoped! ‘Or perhaps she merely has business with someone else in the household and not the duke at all.’

My lord still appeared worried, although he forced himself to better his spirits for my sake. ‘It shall be a pleasure to make his acquaintance, I’m sure.’

We spent the better half of the day in the carriage, and upon reaching our destination we were told that the duke was unavailable for the rest of

the day. The duchess wasn't accepting guests either, as there had been illness in the house—we were assured that the emergency had passed, however.

'And has a Mr Devere requested an audience with your duke this day?' Lord Devere inquired.

'*Oui, Monsieur,*' the steward reported, slightly exasperated about the fact. 'The duke could not see him today, but as he refused to leave before gaining an audience, the duke kindly extended Monsieur Devere accommodation for the night.'

'May I see Mr Devere?' my husband requested, sneaking me a smile. His brother's persistence amused him, and I think my lord was pleased that we'd caught up with his little brother before he did himself and their family name any damage. 'I am his older brother, James Devere, Earl of Oxford.'

'Of course, my lord.' The steward humbled himself a peg. 'Monsieur Devere is in the Long Gallery. If you will follow me.' The steward led us up the grand staircase beyond the foyer.

In the Long Gallery we found our brother looking out a set of huge windows. He appeared to be completely contented with the view. In fact, I had not seen him so at peace in a week.

'Earnest,' Lord Devere called to his brother, but he did not look to us as we approached. 'Earnest, what in god's name are we doing at the court of the Duc de Guise?'

I looked for the source of Devere's enchantment to see our dear sister in a courtyard, armed with a sword and duelling with another swordsman in front of the duke.

'Oh, my god, it's Ashlee,' I mumbled, horrified. To the best of my knowledge, Ashlee knew nothing about swordplay, but observation told me differently, for she was well and truly holding her own against the competition.

'She is magnificent,' uttered Devere, openly revelling in the sight of the woman he desired.

'Well, if she's down there, let us go fetch her.' Lord Devere headed for the door.

'I have tried to get to her,' Mr Devere informed him, sounding far calmer than one would expect. 'The duke's guards intercepted me and brought me straight back up here. So, for now, I must content myself with

the knowledge that she is in my view,' he nodded toward Ashlee, 'and doing a far better job of defending herself than I gave her credit for...she displays all the valour and technique of an experienced knight.' He was awed, relieved and delighted.

My eyes were glued to the duel taking place and when Ashlee tripped on her skirt and fell backwards, it seemed the game was up. Devere and I both gasped. Ashlee's opponent whipped his sword tip across her upper arm, tearing through the sleeve of her brown velvet frock to leave a trail of red in between the damaged fabric. Ashlee inspected her wound briefly, but did not nurse it. Surely it ailed her, yet it only seemed to make her more resolved to win the contest. She recovered her footing quickly and fought back with twice as much vigour as before. In a frightful onslaught Ashlee disarmed her opponent and, to the duke's applause, she bowed to him to claim victory.

We all, in the Long Gallery, applauded the outcome.

'That was extraordinary!' My admiration for my friend worried Lord Devere, although he was quietly impressed himself.

'Please don't take a fancy to duelling, my love,' he jested.

'I daresay James fears the competition.' Earnest defended his brother. 'Swordplay is not his best attribute.'

James was mildly annoyed by his brother's insult, but he did not refute it. 'Give me a pistol any day.'

We watched as Ashlee passed her weapon to the man attending her and as she moved to approach the duke, he unexpectedly ordered her arrest.

'What does he think he's playing at?' Devere protested, and would have stormed to Ashlee's rescue had the duke's guards not entered from both ends of the Long Gallery. 'Ashlee!' Devere yelled to his wife, desperate for her welfare.

FROM THE TRAVEL JOURNALS OF MRS ASHLEE DEVERE

A lot of good our magnificent duel had done me; now I was being arrested!

I could only suppose that the duke would tell me that my sword fighting skills were beyond the capabilities of a mortal female and that I had made a pact with the devil! Well, maybe that was not so far from the truth, I

considered, turning my questioning gaze to Albray. He had parted with me as soon as the duel was over and was now accompanying me.

I don't understand what went wrong. My knight was as surprised as I was to be trailing the duke back to his room of court under guard.

It had felt wonderful, though, to wield a weapon with such precision. My stupid dress had proven to be our only downfall. Obviously, Albray was not used to fighting in so much excess fabric.

I'm sorry about the gash, he said, obviously following my train of thought, or I his.

I hadn't even felt the wound until Albray had departed my form—no doubt he had learned to ignore pain. My wound had begun to smart, however.

It was that gown of yours...have you ever considered finding yourself a nice pair of trousers?

More than once actually. A precious lot of good a change of clothing was going to do me now.

The guards left me in the room of court with the duke, who called for his steward to fetch a surgeon to tend my arm.

'Do you intend to adhere to your blood oath, your grace?' I asked before I accepted his help.

'I do indeed,' he assured me with a warm smile, which set my misgivings to rest. 'And then some.'

'But my arrest?'

'Was a fabrication,' he said merrily. 'It seems your pesky Monsieur Devere refuses to leave before questioning me about you, and as he just witnessed your duel and arrest from the Long Gallery, I now have the perfect opportunity to delay him for you. While he pleads for your release, you and your gypsy party can be on your way.'

I was relieved to learn of the duke's foresight. 'That is brilliant, your grace. I could kiss you!' I was so excited not to be thrown in prison, and to have freed the gypsies, that I quite lost my head.

'I do wish you would.' He grinned mischievously, and I obliged him with a kiss on the cheek.

'Thank you, your grace.' I then curtsied to pay my respects. 'I am most indebted to you.'

‘Nonsense,’ he chuckled. ‘We both know that it is I who is indebted to you...Lady du Lac.’ He took hold of my hand and kissed it.

The door to the room opened abruptly and I withdrew my hand from the duke’s and stepped away. I feared my husband was coming for me, but it was the Duchess de Guise and therefore I curtsied deeply.

‘Enough is enough, my dear duke. I shall not allow you to arrest this woman.’ The duchess confronted her husband on my behalf. ‘Have you not seen our son?’ she appealed. ‘He is healthier than he has ever been. And our servants are recovering also.’

The duke was smiling as he said, ‘Anything for you, my love. You win. I will not arrest her.’

Surprised to have won so easily, the duchess decided to push her luck. ‘You will allow Mademoiselle Winston to depart Orleans this day, with *all* her companions.’

‘And on my best horse.’ The duke turned to me: ‘I do believe that was our arrangement?’

When the duchess saw my large smile and my affirmative nod, the penny dropped. ‘Including Cingar Choron?’ she said hopefully. As both the duke and I nodded, the duchess was possessed by happiness and embraced her husband. I looked away as they renewed their affection for each other.

‘It seems that whatever harm has been done to my house, you have completely undone,’ the duke said at last, calling for my attention. ‘True to the reputation of the fey, the magic you weave is pure inspiration.’

De Guise was not implying heresy this time. It was a true compliment; Albray had also referred to me as one of the fey, at our first meeting.

‘Just science and training, your grace,’ I insisted once more, smiling.

The duchess was delighted and clapped her hands together. ‘We shall make provision for your journey...food, wine, and an open cart to transport your party.’ She looked at her husband, certain that he would agree to anything in his present mood.

The duke cast his eyes over me as he seconded his wife’s kind offer of assistance. ‘Perhaps some new clothes for our heroine,’ he commented as his steward returned with the surgeon.

‘Could I impose on your grace for a suit of men’s clothes?’ I felt this was the perfect opportunity to change my identity. I would leave the lady behind in Orleans.

‘My very thought,’ the duke concurred, having witnessed my fall during the duel. ‘I think we can devise some far more suitable attire for one such as yourself.’

It soon became clear that Gascon de Guise was indeed a man of his word. I left his house with a full belly, new attire, a sword, a pistol and *all* the gypsies, who were quite amazed at their release.

The horses that had carried Rumer and me to Orleans were hitched to the front of a cart large enough to carry supplies and the members of our party, of which there were fourteen.

I sat astride in the saddle of a fine white stallion named Destiny and as I rode from the house of de Guise, I embraced a real sense of achievement. It wasn’t that I had helped so many, or that I had left happiness in my wake: I had proven to myself that I needed no mortal protector. I had stepped into my own power and I felt like a valiant prince—there would be no going back to being a vulnerable princess. Come what may on my journey to the Sinai, I could handle it on my own...with just a little help from my friends in the spirit world.

My stomach would not forgo lunch any longer. I didn’t want to leave Ashlee’s tale, but the sound of my hunger pangs was becoming a serious distraction.

As I walked out into the blazing sun, the campsite was like a ghost town and I began to wonder if I’d been deserted.

I found the cook in the mess tent and he informed me in broken English that James Conally had accompanied Andre to town to meet our shipment. Those who remained on-site were sensibly sleeping off the heat of the day in their tents.

I picked up a tray of spoils: a sandwich, a chocolate bar, some fruit and more water, and returned to my abode. Awaiting me on my desk was a note marked with a small red cross that looked suspiciously like my birthmark.

I opened and read the note, which was written in Arabic. It was from Akbar: he was awaiting an audience with me in the Cave of Hathor. I’d forgotten my suggestion to Akbar that we talk this afternoon.

Oh dear. This presented me with a slight dilemma and I sat down to eat my lunch and dwell upon it.

I didn't feel safe going to meet with Akbar and his men alone. If I took Albray's stone along on my person, he would know my mind and perhaps perceive my little dream about him. I could carry the stone in my bag or a pocket, but I didn't like not having Albray on hand. After much pondering I decided I would swiftly summon Albray and ask him to accompany me, and then place the stone in my bag. If I was quick, hopefully my knight wouldn't have the chance to perceive any of my little fantasies about him.

Miss Montrose, how are you this fine day? Albray asked upon arrival, sounding suspiciously chirpy.

'Well, thank you.' I slipped his stone into my bag. 'And you?'

Very well, he affirmed, still smiling broadly.

I'd never seen my knight so jovial before. 'And what is the cause of today's frightfully good cheer?'

Albray shrugged off his good mood. 'I don't know...some days it's just grand to be a spirit.'

I wasn't too sure what to make of that. I was unwilling to raise the subject of my dream; if he raised it, I could deny it.

'Akbar wants to meet with me.' I explained the reason for the summons.

Yes, Albray nodded, *and you would do well to heed his advice.*

'What makes you say that?'

Albray fixed me with a knowing look. *I told you I would be of service if left at leisure.*

That seemed to explain what Albray did with his free time in the land of the living. 'My own personal spy,' I said, honoured, before I departed the tent with Albray following. 'What did you find out about him?' I whispered my question, even though the steep dirt track I ascended to the ruins was completely devoid of people.

He belongs to an order of warriors known as the Melchi. They protect the interests of the ancient Egyptian order of Melchi-Zadok.

Melchi-Zadok, roughly translated, meant priest-kings, and this ancient order had eventually become known as *Melchizedek*.

The later Scottish chapter of these priest-kings carried on the traditions and teachings of the famed Fisher Kings of folklore.

'Another Grail association!' In my mind, all this information was beginning to connect and merge into new theories, quite opposed to any that

had been presented to me to date.

The fairytales and legends which developed out of Grail lore served the equivalent function in the Cathar faith as the parables of the New Testament served in Catholicism. This fairy lore was born in the eighth century following the implementation of the Donation of Constantine, which, incidentally, my order knows is a complete forgery.

The Donation to which Albray referred made its first appearance in the middle of the eighth century, but was thought to have been written by the Emperor Constantine some four hundred years before, although it was never produced or mentioned in the interim. This document changed the political face of Europe. It proclaimed that the Emperor Constantine appointed the 'universal pope' as Christ's elected representative on Earth, and as the papal dignitary held authority over any earthly ruler he had the power to create and destroy kings. In 751 AD the Vatican began to dispose of the Merovingian line of kings and replaced them with a new dynasty, the Carolingians. This being the case, it was not surprising that Albray's order believed that the pivotal document was a forgery.

The Donation transformed the nature of monarchy: from an office of princely service to the community it became an office of absolute rule; the kings of Europe became servants of the church instead of servants of the people.

'Except in Scotland.' I realised the significance of the Scottish chapter of the Sangreal Knights. In fact, Robert the Bruce and all of Scotland had been excommunicated by the pope of the day.

Indeed, Albray said. The Grail legacy was forsaken in all but the Gaelic realms.

'So when the Bible states that some of Christ's apostles were fishermen, what the text might actually have said was that they were the Fisher Kings of an ancient priesthood and that they harvested men's souls, rather than the produce of the sea.'

Albray seemed pleased by my reasoning. *Exactly. Christ himself became a priest of this order after his crucifixion. In the Bible this promotion into the inner sanctum of the senior priests is recorded as the ascension, which reads to the layman like some supernatural occurrence. But the Essene priests, the Magi, employed the names of the Old Testament archangels. The head priest, or Zadok, was the Archangel Michael, and his*

ambassador was the Archangel Gabriel, and so on. The name of the inner sanctum of the Melchizedek order was referred to as—

‘Heaven!’ I guessed the punchline. ‘In which case, the two angels who guarded the passage to heaven during Jesus’ ascension were Essene priests guarding the inner sanctum of the order.’ I stuck out my bottom lip as I considered this made far more sense than my previous understanding; though I’d not really bothered to form any theories on the subject, as I had always considered the Bible as a propaganda tool rather than a serious historical reference. ‘So,’ I proposed lightheartedly, ‘heaven has sent an angel to me.’ I motioned to the ruins ahead, wherein Akbar awaited.

So it would appear, Albray conceded with a smile.

I passed through the crumbling Shrine of the Kings into the Main Court, which led to the Portico and the entrance to the Cave of Hathor. Not that there was much to define one chamber of this dwelling from another—the walls and columns were crumbling into the sand and the roof was nonexistent. Only in the cave carved out of the mountain did a roof still remain.

It was clear to me that the structure Andre’s team had uncovered, but not yet opened—which Hereford called the Star-Fire Temple—had obviously superseded the Hathor Temple complex, for there was no evidence that supermetals had been used in this structure or it would probably still be standing in its entirety. It seemed more likely that this complex was purely for the purpose of the construction and maintenance of the Star-Fire Temple beneath.

Akbar’s two associates stood guard at the entrance to the Cave of Hathor. As I approached, the Bedouins bowed deeply, having comprehended that falling to the ground before me was not appropriate. I took the time to learn their names, which served to set all of us more at ease. They were Kadar and Kamali, neither of whom was as large and imposing as Akbar, but then, they were really little more than youths. They advised that their lord was waiting inside the cave.

I entered the cave. Raising the already unbearable temperature of the day was a tall flaming torch, the handle of which was wedged into the ground where it stood. Akbar was nowhere in sight. Looking up, I noticed the absence of the weapon I’d hung in the roof during my previous visit.

‘You managed to retrieve your sword, I see.’ I announced my arrival, although I felt sure Akbar was well aware of me already.

‘With some difficulty.’ Akbar emerged from behind the pillar of Amenemhet the Third. ‘I shall only ever draw it in your defence from now on,’ he vowed.

‘That’s comforting, Akbar.’ I wiped the sweat from my brow with the palm of my hand. ‘Could we not have met down at the camp? There’s nobody there.’

‘Any walls belonging to Molier have ears. This place I trust.’ He took a seat on the ground and I joined him.

‘You are implying that my tent might be bugged?’ I was shocked.

‘Molier likes to know everything about everyone who works for him.’ Akbar further inflamed my fears.

‘Then how is it that you managed to obtain employment?’ I wasn’t sure I believed that this expedition was as cloak and dagger as he implied.

‘I am just an Arab,’ Akbar explained, ‘and not considered a threat.’

What if the surveillance situation was true? What would anyone listening make of my conversations with Albray? If Molier had killed Albray, would he suspect to whom I referred? I looked at Albray, who was asking what the term ‘bugged’ meant. *It is an electronic means of listening in to the conversations going on in my tent*, I explained simply.

Albray was worried. *That would mean that Molier could be aware of my presence here!*

I’m so sorry. Now, because I was too lazy to use our psychic link, I might have given my ace-in-the-hole away. *He can’t harm you, can he?*

I’m not worried for me, Albray clarified. *Molier has the know-how to banish me in order to get to you. You must not let him get his hands on the stone.*

I will not, I vowed, touched that Albray was more concerned about my welfare than his own. ‘What interest does Molier have in me?’ I asked Akbar.

‘His is a sinister and perverse purpose. He has a lust for supernatural power and sacred knowledge that is second to none and he will do anything to achieve his goals.’

What did I tell you! Albray was impressed by Akbar’s assessment.

‘But what is Molier’s agenda?’

Akbar fixed me in his gaze. 'He seeks the Plane of Shar-on.'

I frowned. 'But the Plain of Sharon is in Israel.'

'That is a longstanding confusion,' he informed me. 'The Plane of Shar-on is not of this world. In pyramid texts it is called the Field of Iaru.'

'The dimension of the blessed.' I had heard of that.

'It is the dimension of the orbit of light,' Akbar stated.

'Well, that sounds like a nice place. I can understand why Molier would want to go there.' I rolled with it. 'I still don't see the malicious intent.'

'Molier shall never achieve his goal,' Akbar assured me. 'An abomination such as he could never ascend to Shar-on. The porthole would be shut down forever if he attempted to utilise it. Our problem is that Molier still believes this avenue is open to him, via a daughter of Isis, such as you are.'

From reading about Earnest Devere's heightened psychic awareness, obtained through his union with Ashlee, I suspected I knew what Akbar was driving at. 'Then...I would not be of use to Molier unless I love him.'

'Exactly.' Akbar was pleased that I was following his explanation. 'But Molier could enchant you into believing that he is a man you love. If you currently hold feelings for someone he could assume their appearance in order to get to you. Does any one man hold your heart at this time?'

What an embarrassing question to be asked with Albray crouched right alongside me. If I said no, I might give Albray the wrong impression, and as I doubted that Molier could impersonate a ghost and get away with it, there was no point trying to explain Albray to Akbar.

'I would not ask if the answer was not vital for your protection,' Akbar prompted, as I was taking so long to reply.

'There is not a man alive who interests me at present,' I told him in all honesty.

'Are you sure?' Akbar grilled. 'No movie stars you have a crush on?'

I laughed and shook my head. 'I'm far more likely to have a crush on a professor than a movie star, but all the same, there is no one.'

'Then that only leaves Molier the option of enchanting you into believing that you are in love with him.' Akbar was thinking out loud.

'You make him sound like a sorcerer.'

‘That is exactly what he is.’ Akbar awarded me his full attention once more. ‘He has cheated his physical nature on every level, and now he seeks to cheat the cosmic order on a spiritual level as well.’

‘He expects that a union with me is going to do that for him?’

‘No.’ Akbar smiled, amused by my naivety. ‘He would seduce you only in order to open the door to the temple complex inside this mountain. He needs a daughter of the blood to do that.’

‘So he does.’ I bit my lip as I considered this. ‘So, Molier is of the blood too,’ I assumed.

Akbar shook his head. ‘That is why he is an abomination. No other man in recorded history who did not carry the Gene of Isis has ever been fed the “ambrosia of the gods”. It is our understanding that only those souls who are ready for spiritual advancement will be born into the bloodline, and to abuse divine order is an offence against the gods. Molier does not carry the gene of Isis in his molecular structure, so the Fire-Stone substance could not react on it to activate his spiritual enlightenment. However, it has mutated his DNA in ways that we could not, and cannot, predict. He is the only abomination of his kind that we know of so there is no precedent for his crime.’

‘So Molier is after the Star and Fire vials,’ I ventured, ‘but to what end? It is my understanding that the Star substance is virtually useless to a man unless he has the love of a daughter of the bloodline.’

‘You know about the vials?’ Akbar was obviously very curious to know how I got that information.

I only nodded so that he would continue to fill me in on what he knew.

‘*Urim-Schumir* and *Thummim-Schethiya*—the Fire-Stone and the Highward Fire-Stone—are treasures of the House of Gold. When these are brought together over the Ark of the Covenant they manifest unified light and perfection and create a porthole to the Plane of Shar-on.’

Now I was beginning to fathom the big picture, although I could scarcely believe it. ‘Are you trying to tell me that the Ark of the Covenant is hidden in this mountain?’ In Hereford’s account regarding the Star-Fire Temple, he and his wife had never opened the door in that inner chamber. Was *this* what it contained?

‘I could not tell you,’ Akbar conceded, as the door to the complex had not been opened in several lifetimes. ‘But it is said that one of the Arks is

still hidden here.'

'One of the Arks?' I queried, believing that only one existed.

'Even a text as incomplete as the Bible clearly hints at this, for it mentions both the Ark of the Covenant that was made by Bezaleel to house the Tables of Testimony and the Ark built by Moses, supposedly to house the Ten Commandments.'

'And which of these is thought to be housed in this mountain?' I queried.

'Hard to say,' Akbar admitted, 'for both were fashioned here on Mt Serâbit.'

'Well, what is the worst that could happen if Molier succeeded in his aims? The porthole to Sharon would be closed?'

'That would be the beginning of the end for this world,' Akbar said emphatically. 'Denied access to the Plane of Shar-on, Molier would still have access to the most powerful tool known to mankind, but there are specific instructions for the handling of the Ark. If these rules are not obeyed it will kill without warning, and the fury of its unleashed power will cause plagues and tumours upon the earth.'

'I see.' I exhaled deeply, not really wanting to think about the most obvious solution to our troubles. 'Perhaps I should just go home,' I ventured, though it pained me to say it.

'There is no point now,' Akbar hastened to tell me. 'Molier knows of your existence and he will hunt you down.'

'You make it sound like he's stalking me.'

'He *is*!' Both Akbar and Albray responded at once.

It seemed to follow that if the daughters of Isis were Molier's fetish, he had had one within his grasp two centuries ago! *Ashlee hasn't mentioned being stalked by him.*

Yet! Albray emphasised. *You haven't finished reading her journal.*

'Then what would you have me do?' I put the question to Akbar and Albray.

'You must combat Molier and defeat him,' Akbar replied as if the answer was obvious.

Exactly, Albray concurred. *I keep telling you that we need to work on your psychic talents, as it will take more than a sword to defeat Molier . . . I am the non-living proof of that.*

I was so horrified by the suggestion that I couldn't speak.

'I assumed that you knew your mission here.' Akbar clearly hadn't wanted to alarm me. 'You have such talent with a sword that I assumed you had been trained for the purpose.'

Overwhelmed as I was, I didn't want to alarm Akbar either. 'You might say I am still in training,' I clarified for his benefit. 'I hope to be ready by the time Molier arrives here in the Sinai, if indeed he intends to come here.'

'He will come now he knows you are here.' Of this Akbar seemed very certain. 'As time is of the essence, I shall not distract you from your studies any longer.'

My nerves were making me feel queasy and as the heat in the cave wasn't helping, I was more than happy to seize the opportunity to depart. 'I'll let you know if Molier sends word of his arrival.' I stood to make good my escape.

'Make haste with your preparations,' he encouraged, voicing his concern. 'There is much at stake.'

'I know,' I managed to reply without sounding sceptical. The truth was that with all the information I'd been subjected to of late from various people, I would be a fool to discount their accounts and theories.

Albray was more attentive and up-vibe than usual that evening; I, for a change, was quiet and thoughtful. I picked at my dinner and then thought about returning to Ashlee's story, but I couldn't concentrate on the text. I read the first sentence several times over and each time my mind drifted back to the Cave of Hathor and my conversation with Akbar.

So how do I develop my psychic skills? I queried telepathically, not prepared to risk speaking aloud to Albray, who was currently fascinated with the screensaver on my computer.

Well... He dragged his enchanted sights from all the pretty colours on my screen. *The first thing you have to do is actually believe in psychic skill.*

And what if I'm a dud? I appealed, so afraid this was the case.

A *dud*, Albray repeated, unfamiliar with the term, although he caught my meaning and it amused him. I guess *that you won't know until you try.*

Fair enough. I closed Ashlee's book to concentrate on Albray's instruction. *Let's give it a go then.*

My knight ran through a short meditation to calm and focus me, and then we worked on activating my etheric vision, although I don't know how much success we had. As I was pretty much the only living thing in my tent, Albray had me focusing upon myself in the mirror. He was telling me to concentrate on my third eye area in order to look beyond my physical self to see my light-body. I began to see a kind of negative impression of my being superimposed upon my reflection.

That's how it starts, good, Albray encouraged. What you are seeing is the etheric shell. Now, if you stay focused and endeavour to see beyond that, you should start to perceive the light-body and its auric hues.

I strained and I focused, I really did, but I just couldn't see anything beyond the negative impression. A couple of times I lost sight of myself in the mirror altogether and I felt as if I was on the verge of a breakthrough, but when excitement welled, my perception regressed back to my etheric shell and then my physical image once more.

'I can't do this,' I muttered, feeling frustrated, drained and rather silly for believing that I could accomplish a supernatural feat; deep down I doubted that anyone could. I left my seated position before the mirror and collapsed onto my bed.

You've done really well for your first attempt. Albray sounded surprised.

Yeah, right, I scoffed in my mind. *Ashlee had more talent when she was still in the cradle.*

It's really not fair to compare yourself with Miss Granville . . . most of the mystics that ever lived would pale by comparison.

Well, if Ashlee was so damn talented then why didn't she destroy Molier and save me the trouble? I was moody and tired.

You'll read all about that tomorrow, I should think. Albray maintained his sweet mood, understanding that I was exhausted. *For today, it might be time we both retired.*

You wish to be dismissed? I hauled my bag up onto the bed and fished around for the stone.

I do, but I would ask a favour of you. Albray sat down on the bed beside me to make his request. *I want you to sleep with the stone in the palm of your hand.*

‘Why?’ I tried not to sound alarmed by his request. How was I possibly going to drift into a dream space without fantasising about my knight?

Would you? Please, he appealed once more, obviously having no intention of explaining his request. With those big dark eyes gazing into mine, he didn’t need to explain himself. I found myself nodding in agreement.

Sleep came upon me quickly that evening, and I awoke feeling like I’d barely closed my eyes.

My tent was brilliantly illuminated this morning. Even under the brightest sunlight my quarters didn’t usually have this much natural light. I rolled over to look at the clock on my bedside table to find Albray lying on the bed beside me, minus the weapons and chain mail he usually wore. His shirt was gaping open and all I could think about was planting a kiss upon his smooth muscular torso...and so I did.

Placing a finger under my chin Albray raised my face and engaged my lips in a kiss.

Yes, I was dreaming again, but what a dream! His body pressed hard against mine; I hadn’t ever wanted a man so desperately and the touch of his hands upon my body excited me beyond all reason. We were both half naked and well worked up into a passionate frenzy before my sensibilities found me. I thought, *Wow...and I had the impression Albray wasn’t interested in me.*

Then Akbar’s concerns today surfaced in my mind. *That only leaves Molier the option of enchanting you into believing that you are in love with him. If you currently hold feelings for someone he could assume their appearance in order to get to you.*

The next moment I was out of bed, panting in the wake of abandoning my bliss, and covering my bare breasts with my discarded shirt.

‘This is too sudden for you,’ Albray assumed, bemused at being abandoned. ‘I fear I have misread your—’

‘How do I know you are not Molier?’ I stated my true concern, which seemed to soothe Albray somewhat.

He smiled and sat up to reason with me. ‘Ask me a question. Something that Molier wouldn’t know.’

‘All right.’ I mulled it over. I had to ask him something about our relationship that had occurred prior to setting foot in the Middle East. ‘Where did we first meet, and what was your first impression of me?’

‘We first met in your home, in the...sitting room? Or that is what such a room might have been called in Miss Granville’s time.’

‘Close enough,’ I warranted, breathing a little easier. ‘And?’ I prompted him to finish answering my query.

‘And I thought upon sighting you...’ He paused to recall his feelings. ‘Here is a goddess...’ This, I very much doubted, until he added: ‘And she’s half naked.’ He chuckled in conclusion and I rolled my eyes, for this observation of Albray’s I did remember. ‘And I was worried by your obvious scepticism and ignorance of your own potential.’

‘Albray?’ I queried, wanting so much to believe that it was him and that he did hold feelings for me, or, at the very least, that this was my own dream that I could feel at liberty to pursue.

‘Yes,’ Albray said, ‘it *is* me.’

Now I was confused. ‘You’ve never shown the slightest interest in me before today.’

‘Have I not?’ Albray had to grin. ‘I must be a better actor than I thought. I felt sure that during our duel with Akbar my feelings for you had been betrayed.’

The overwhelming feeling of love I had experienced upon surrendering to Albray’s control had been his feelings for me! My heart exploded in my chest at this realisation.

‘My timing is terrible, considering what you learned today from Akbar,’ he conceded. ‘But an unrequited love has had me preoccupied for many a long year, and it took nearly losing you for me to admit to myself that I was falling in love with you. And *then* I had to consider whether encouraging your love was not an abuse of my position.’ At the last, he waved off the whole idea. ‘I made a mistake—’

‘No.’ I came to kneel on the bed to prevent his departure. ‘There is no mistake.’ I kissed my knight to reassure him, hoping to pick up where we left off. ‘Please stay with me.’

Clearly he wanted to, but I had planted a doubt in his mind, and he in mine. ‘There will be other nights.’

I suspect that Albray saw how dispirited his decision made me feel, for he raised my chin and urged me to look him in the eye.

‘Perhaps we shall both have the courage to speak of how we feel when you’re in a conscious state.’ He knew that this was partly the reason why I was having trouble believing that he did hold feelings for me.

‘But this is *my* dream.’ I was convinced of that, at least, for our conversation had been too detailed and personal for Molier to have bluffed his way through; it could only have been my imagination.

‘No, Mia,’ Albray confessed. ‘You moved beyond mere dreaming when you sought me out last night in the etheric realms. *You*,’ he paused to emphasise, for he knew I would be amazed by his assertion, ‘have mastered the art of astral projection, for this is an out-of-body experience.’

I gasped, excited by the news.

‘So you see, I was pushed to make the truth known to you,’ he admitted at last. ‘I couldn’t watch you trying so hard to develop your psychic talent when, in fact, you are doing splendidly. Just different psychic skills than those Miss Granville utilised.’

‘So you know about our meeting last night?’

He nodded a little guiltily.

I was going to have a go at him for not mentioning it today, but then it occurred to me: ‘Is that why you were in such a good mood this morning?’

He restrained his smile, tickled by his own cheekiness. ‘That is also why I requested you sleep with the stone after dismissing me...for you could not seek me again in the etheric realms if I was bound to your physical plane of expression. I’m sorry I haven’t owned up before now, but I truly thought I would be doing you a disservice...for no substantial relationship can ever come from loving me.’

I nudged his forehead gently with my own and smiled fondly to assure him, ‘I am more than happy with the man of my dreams.’

I kissed him with all the pent-up passion I possessed. The fascination was mutual; hence, there was no way in heaven I was allowing my knight to leave unfulfilled.

It had been an eternity since I had awoken from sleep feeling so content and vibrant. I smiled broadly as I stretched out, revelling in the release I felt; then my memory served to remind me that I had felt release several times

over during the night, and the recollection of my lover made me feel all the more delicious.

Albray's stone was still in my hand and I held it to my heart. *Albray, Albray, Albray.*

Miss Montrose, he said, upon appearing at my bedside, and noting my large smile, he asked: *And what is the cause of today's frightful good cheer?*

'Sweet dreams,' I replied.

Really? What about? he asked curiously. The smile fell from my face and panic seized my heart. *Just kidding.* He grinned and lay down on the bed facing me.

I would have hit him had he had more substance. *I feel sure that giving your charge heart failure isn't part of your job description.*

I shall never fail your heart, he said in all earnestness. *It is the most precious gift I have received in ages.*

Oh, god, he was so perfect. How could creation be so cruel as to place us centuries and centuries apart? *I must thank you too.*

What for? he inquired winningly.

For making me feel so divine...for helping me see the wonder of life and the potential within myself. I have never been more beholden to anyone, Albray. The desire and love I saw in his face made my heart do backflips, and my smile grew so wide it was starting to make my face ache. *Perhaps I could just go back to sleep for a while?* I wanted to wrap myself around his body again; union with him aided me to touch the divine within myself.

I think we've done enough damage for one night.

What do you mean? I frowned, thinking he was having second thoughts about us.

Albray smiled to reassure me and then cast a hand wide, indicating I should look at the inside of my tent.

I sat bolt upright when I noticed that my tent seemed to have been ransacked. 'Oh, my god!' I climbed out of bed, bemused. *We did this?*

Albray almost laughed. *No. YOU did this.*

Me! I couldn't think how, and then I recalled Ashlee's tale and the instances of objects levitating each time Devere and Ashlee became intimate. I also seemed to remember that her psychic powers had increased when she had been awakened by her prince. I rushed to my mirror.

Lo and behold, I immediately saw straight through my physical image, through my etheric shell to my light-body's auric hues and the seven whirling centres of light and colour that had become known in esoteric circles as the chakra system. Tears of pride and relief filled my eyes. 'I'm doing it!' I was amazed to see my heart centre pulsating with huge bursts of rose-pink light; this was the same colour that Ashlee had observed emanating from the heart centres of her companions after they had fallen in love.

Yes, *you are*, Albray agreed, with admiration in his voice.

I looked back at him, simply beaming with the exhilarating mix of love and power that was surging through my being. *Then there can be no doubt that you are my prince*, I said seductively, and this also led me to comprehend something else. *Which means you must be of the blood, too.*

Ah...*I was*, Albray pointed out.

I knelt down in front of him. *And your second name wouldn't happen to have been Devere?*

Albray was shocked for a moment, wondering how I could have learned this, but as it was obvious I knew the truth, he nodded to confirm my guess.

You never told Ashlee? I assumed.

It kept our relationship .. . uncomplicated, he justified. *As you shall read.*

'Oh...' I protested. *Couldn't I just go back to sleep for a little while...I mean, the place is already a mess?*

Placing my personal desires above the greater good would definitely be abusing my position, Albray reasoned. *But I shall greatly look forward to this evening.*

Not nearly as much as me. I released a disappointed breath and resigned myself to my duty. Gazing around at the upheaval in my tent, I thought cleaning up should come first.

Thankfully, I hadn't damaged any of my equipment. *Tonight I'll be sure to pack away anything valuable.*

I imagined all my belongings floating around my tent while I slept, and wondered if I'd been moaning out loud at the same time as I had been in my

dream. The idea made me blush with delight and embarrassment. 'It's a good thing the camp is practically empty.'

I checked my email after breakfast, prior to sitting down with Ashlee's tale, to find a message from Andre.

It simply said that the team had been delayed in Sharm el-Sheikh, and wouldn't be back before tomorrow evening. He hoped my research was going well, and requested that I email him to assure him that all was well at camp.

What a sweetie, I thought, as Andre was obviously still wary of Akbar's interest in me. I, however, was not.

I emailed Andre to assure him everything was fine, and then made a cup of tea and sat down at my desk with Ashlee's epic journal.

It seemed that the forthcoming chapter was in sync with my current mood, for Ashlee had entitled it 'Passion'.

LESSON 14

PASSION

FROM THE TRAVEL JOURNALS OF MRS ASHLEE DEVERE

I very much liked my new persona. The clothes that the Duc de Guise had supplied served my purpose beautifully.

I was green velvet from head to foot. This fabric, I was assured, had been tested with ammonia to guarantee it contained no lethal dye—the duke would not make that fatal mistake again.

The outfit consisted of green trousers that fitted my legs snugly; over the top of these were long brown leather boots which folded down at the knee and were designed to be unfolded as required to give more protection during swordplay or from the elements. On top of my very valuable corset I wore a pale green silk shirt and a long-sleeved velvet jacket that buttoned down the front. The coat fell to my mid-thigh, but as the duke felt this was not modest enough for a lady of the blood he had his tailor run me up a long sleeveless tunic of the same fabric and colour, which was little more than a length of fabric with a hole in the centre for my head. The tailor added a large hood to this, and once on my body the green velvet tunic fell to my ankles down the front and back. The garment was strapped to my body by the belt that was slung around my hips—in which was holstered my pistol on my right side while a scabbard that held my sword hung on my left. The additional tunic gave me the comfort of modest attire, but as there were no joins down the side of the garment, it did not restrict riding and swordplay.

With my hair braided back and the green velvet hood drawn over my head, I could easily pass for a man—albeit with a somewhat dated sense of fashion. Still, as a woman, I felt very bohemian.

On the first night of our journey, the males of the clan were delighted that their women had decided to journey with the caravans toward Orleans to await the outcome of my meeting with de Guise. Subsequent to my speedy

victory, we met up with the rest of the Charon clan en route back to the road to Paris.

In the camp there was much rejoicing and the gypsies held a great feast in my honour that night—for we had provisions aplenty courtesy of the duke. I had the very great pleasure of being serenaded by Cingar, and he was masterful indeed; he played more passionate and heart-wrenching violin compositions than any famed composer I had been made aware of. In addition, Cingar was also one of the most beautiful men I had ever seen, with long unruly dark curls falling to his waist and a wee French-style beard and moustache. He had beautiful soft brown eyes, a tanned and vibrant face, and a body that was long, lean and fit from life on the road. I also loved all his jewellery—rings, ornate wristbands and charms on neck chains—but most of all I liked the large round earring attached to his left ear and indicated to any interested girl that he was still a single man.

But not for long, Chavi had informed me. As Cingar's grandmother—her husband, daughter and son-in-law being deceased—it was Chavi's responsibility to choose a suitable wife for Cingar from among other Romany clans. This she had done and Chavi invited me to the wedding, which would take place en route to the sea. Cingar had yet to meet his bride and was more than a little apprehensive about doing so. Apparently, the band had been heading home to Italy for the happy event when Cingar had received the duke's request to play at the court in Orleans. As Cingar was willing to do anything to avoid facing his marriage vows he had had the caravan sidetrack to Orleans, which had nearly proven fatal.

Despite his engagement, in gratitude for his freedom the captain had pledged his undying devotion and service—for a gypsy, there was nothing on Earth that was valued more than liberty. Cingar said that he would make my feats legendary and dedicate to me everything he composed from this day forth.

Of course, I was flattered, but there seemed little point to such devotion when I dared not even tell my gypsy friends my true name. 'If you will see me swiftly and safely to the sea, then I shall be forever in your debt, captain.' Cingar insisted it was not enough, and so we argued in merry spirits for most of the evening.

In recognition of my service, an entire caravan had been vacated for me to inhabit. Not even Nanny was to share with me for she had taken up

lodging with a family of three orphaned girls, aged between five years and fourteen, who were not prepared to relinquish her to my company for the night.

I had not seen Nanny so well and filled with such vitality in many years, so I was not about to break four hearts and do away with the opportunity for privacy and quiet into the bargain! The arrangement suited me just fine.

At dawn my consciousness was greeted by the sweet sound of Cingar's violin and it stirred my heart fearfully. I had disciplined myself not to think about Devere and those precious few days we'd spent together, but the music was so emotive of love that I couldn't help but recall those intimacies that now caused me pain and torment. 'God damn that man,' I muttered under my breath, my longing filling my eyes with tears. I surmised that my husband's dread of his brotherhood's wrath was the driving motivation behind his ardent pursuit of me.

'I shall not mourn the loss of his favours,' I lectured myself as I climbed out of bed to dress. I was convinced that that was all there was to it—I had never experienced sexual bliss with any man but Devere, so how did I know that such ecstasy could not be found with any man that tickled my fancy?

I found myself dwelling on Cingar as I dressed and how enchanting he was. I held no delusions that he was in love with me, but certainly lust was in the air.

That kind of thinking will land you in strife, Mrs Devere.

Noting his emphasis on the Mrs Devere part of that statement, I looked to find Albray leaning against the closed doorway of my quarters.

I forced a smile, not in any mood to be lectured. I wanted Devere out of my heart and Cingar was just the man to take care of it for me. And as the captain was to be married soon I would form no attachment. 'I thought you said you were useless when it came to affairs of love?'

I am, he insisted, which is how I can tell you're heading for disaster.

'No offence, dear friend, but I am not asking for your counsel in this matter.' I finished strapping on my weapons belt and waited for my knight to move aside so that I might join the rest of the band for breakfast before they packed up for the journey south.

Don't love in haste, for spite, he appealed, moving out of my path. It will leave you bitter and remorseful, guaranteed.

'Are you speaking from experience, Albray?' I strongly suspected that he was.

Yes, unfortunately.

'Well, we all have to make mistakes,' I told him and exited, to be greeted by Cingar who, I discovered, was playing for my benefit.

'I shall thus stir your soul to wakefulness every day,' Cingar vowed.

'Every day until you are wed,' Chavi added in warning, for she clearly saw how her grandson doted on me.

When Chavi and Cingar began arguing rather fervently in a dialect I couldn't understand, I left them to see Nanny about breakfast.

FROM THE HONEYMOON JOURNAL OF LADY SUSAN DEVERE

I must say that I am very, very annoyed with my friend, Ashlee Devere, for I feel that her latest stunt to elude her husband was nothing short of cruel!

I can hardly believe our dear sister allowed us to think she was suffering in prison this last week when, in fact, she was probably halfway to Italy by now. Not only has she caused Mr Devere much distress and torment, but James and I have been worried out of our minds.

We would still be commuting to the estate of the Duc de Guise every day to plead Ashlee's case had Devere not found the opportunity to kiss the hand of the Duchess de Guise, whereby he learned the truth and was devastated by it. That Ashlee would go to such lengths to lose him weighed heavily on his heart.

'I am beginning to wonder why I continue this pursuit. I shall never be able to win back her heart and trust.' Mr Devere's eyes turned to the rain beyond our carriage window; the sombre weather complemented his grave mood.

'Of course you will.'

I was surprised when Lord Devere beat me to reassure our brother.

'All we have to do is get your dear wife to stand still long enough to hear your side of the story.'

'I'll never catch her.' Mr Devere sounded so defeated. 'She has a week's head start.'

‘Our sister is travelling with a large caravan, and it is bound to move more slowly than we do,’ I reasoned. ‘And although no one in Italy will know who Ashlee is, I feel sure that Cingar Choron will be easy enough to track down.’ I reached across and placed a hand over my brother’s and squeezed it tight; I had never known anyone to be so cursed by love. I recalled Mr Devere retrieving Ashlee’s charm from the ground on the first day they’d met, and how she had warned him that he would be cursed for his politeness. ‘Don’t give up on her yet. If Ashlee is in as much danger as you suspect, then you’ll get an opportunity to prove where your allegiances truly lie.’

‘You’re right.’ Mr Devere took a deep breath and attempted a smile. ‘Thank you...both.’ He included James in the equation. ‘Your support through this has been invaluable, and very much appreciated.’

‘Think nothing of it,’ Lord Devere insisted. ‘It has been a very interesting journey thus far, and no doubt more educational and stimulating than loitering about, and entertaining, at the Chateau de Vere for months.’

Both Mr Devere and I were rather surprised by my husband’s change in attitude.

‘I’m rather glad I came along.’ My husband pulled out his paper and a cigar, and as content as can be, sat back to read. ‘This travelling business is a lot more character building than I gave it credit for. I’m beginning to see why the Grand Tour was so popular.’

Since the Industrial Revolution, there was too much money to be made at home in England for young lords to indulge their lust for culture and travel.

‘I agree.’ I voiced my feelings on the matter. ‘It is fortunate that we have taken this opportunity to see some of the world now, before the House of Lords and family life consume all of our time.’

I had to admit that I was relishing the adventure myself, and after Ashlee’s latest deception I would know better than to waste any of my enjoyment worrying about her welfare.

FROM THE TRAVEL JOURNALS OF MRS ASHLEE DEVERE

Travelling with gypsies had more advantages than I had originally imagined.

They knew the towns to avoid en route, and always went around the cities where government checkpoints might give them trouble.

Fortunately for me, Cingar's people were well-established traders in southern France and Italy, holding papers of passage for every region through which we passed.

The church had been trying to alter the nomadic lifestyle of the Rom and the other gypsy tribes of Europe for centuries. In some kingdoms, enslavement, imprisonment, deportation and having their children taken from them and placed in foster care, remained a very real threat; like the Chorons, many gypsy families had turned to trade to justify their nomadic lifestyle to the church and to be seen as benefiting society.

In the towns they did stop at, Cingar knew all the officials by name and his offerings of rare spices, fabrics and jewellery from as far afield as Arabia Petrea were always well received. In return, the gypsies were granted free passage and a patch of ground on which to camp for an evening or two. There were also several coppersmiths among the men of the clan and their services were in demand wherever they went.

In tiny villages, Cingar's way with a violin was all the more appreciated—for master musicians did not usually visit these provincial venues. Many residents were not averse to having their fortunes told by the gypsy women either.

My caravan accommodation was cleaner and more comfortable than any I could have obtained at inns along our way. Many English people believed a myth about gypsies—that they were a dirty people. Nothing could have been further from the truth. I had wondered, when I first arrived in the camp, why each family transported so many large washtubs. I soon found out that the upper body and the lower body were never washed in the same tub, nor with the same cloth. The same applied to clothes—upper body clothes in one tub and lower body clothes in another. This explained why gypsy women wore skirts and blouses as opposed to dresses. And, as if the above was not extreme enough, men and children washed with one set of tubs, and women with another. I suppose it goes without saying, then, that bedding and dishes could not be washed using the same tub!

The weather never bothered these people: rain, wind or shine they were joyful just to be at liberty to wander—a sentiment which I shared completely. My beautiful horse felt the same, I believe, for he never tired of

moving forward. Destiny had been a stabled horse all his life, and I suspect the constant stimulation was a great motivation for him. I very much enjoyed riding a horse male-fashion, and found I had far more stamina in the saddle this way.

The captain had not wavered in his pursuit of my affections, despite warnings from his grandmother, and I must confess that by the time we reached the *Gulfe du Lion* I was seriously considering surrendering to his proposals.

Late on the Sunday that marked a fortnight on the road, we made camp outside a coastal village on the outskirts of Marseilles.

The caravan of gypsies never entered Italy via the Alps, as the freezing cold and snow would hinder their journey. It always proved faster, and gave them far less grief, to travel through lower France and take the coastal route via Nice.

I had wandered away from camp to gaze upon the azure waters of the gulf and ease my stiff legs and rump, which were always numbed by the end of a day in the saddle. It was here that Chavi sought me out for a little chat.

Not being the kind of woman to beat around the bush she came right out and demanded that I release her grandson from my enchantment.

‘I have not put a spell on the captain.’ I chuckled at her assumption, until I saw how grave the expression of the old gypsy woman was.

‘You have indeed,’ Chavi accused, ‘and well you know it! I am not speaking of a spell woven with a potion or a chant,’ she said to forestall my impending denial. ‘I speak of the charm that a heroine might have upon a humble male soul, awed by her deeds and strength of character.’

‘I note that you do not consider it might be the heroine who has been enchanted,’ I countered. What was the point of denying my attraction when she could see straight through me?

‘Cingar is not the man you truly love,’ Chavi pointed out, which shocked me slightly and angered me a little too. ‘And he never will be,’ she added firmly, knowing I was in doubt. ‘Just toying with my grandson’s emotions is placing the entire future of our family in great jeopardy.’

Now I thought that she really was exaggerating and she knew it at once.

‘Let me tell you a little of our customs and then you may decide if I am delusional or not,’ she offered, and I agreed.

It seemed that washing was not the only aspect of gypsy life that was subject to many taboos. For as Chavi spoke I fast came to realise that the little affair I had been contemplating so lightly could cause Cingar to be branded as *marimè*, which meant ‘unclean’, although the term carried so many more connotations than this for Chavi—dishonoured, set apart and contaminated, for example. For a gypsy man to be declared unclean was the greatest shame he could suffer and his entire household would suffer along with him, and so ruin his sister Rumer’s chances of making a good marriage.

‘It is social death.’ Chavi wrapped up her case. ‘Anything Cingar wears or touches would be contaminated, including his future wife and offspring, and their offspring and so on.’

‘You can stop there, Chavi,’ I assured her. I felt sick to the stomach when I considered the near-disaster my desire had caused. ‘I can see that there is precious little point to saving a man from prison to have him banished instead.’

‘You must reject Cingar firmly, as soon as possible, and free his heart to embrace other interests,’ Chavi instructed rather than asked.

‘Cingar’s friendship means a lot to me. How can I do this without hurting him?’ I had been doing a fair bit of flirting with him lately.

‘Simply tell him the truth,’ Chavi suggested, more sympathetic now that I had been safely diverted from her grandson. ‘Tell him that your heart belongs to another...this, he will understand.’

‘But the man of my heart is a traitor to the rest of me,’ I said, although aware that such a confession was not entirely truthful.

Chavi took my hands and held them firmly as she briefly went into trance. ‘It is your own reasoning that betrays you, not your husband.’

I gasped, for I had never once let slip that I was married having placed my wedding band with my valuables before I met up with the Charon clan. ‘But he lied,’ I protested, and yet I did not pull my hands from hers. I wanted her to prove me wrong about Devere.

‘The gravity of that lie hangs on other assumptions you have made, and expecting the worst of everyone involved. But what if you have

misjudged some of these situations—then, truly, how grievous is the offence of your beloved?’

I gasped at the shock that shot through my being at her words. The ‘what ifs’ of the past six months bombarded my brain all at once. What if Lord Hereford had died of natural causes? What if the real intent of this brotherhood was merely to protect me? What if the brothers’ prediction of Hereford’s death had come from prophecy, rather than murderous intent? Then they would have been warning Hereford against marrying me, rather than threatening him! What if Devere did love me? Even in arranged marriages there could be great love.

Chavi released my hands. ‘I know I can trust you to do the right thing.’

I had to wonder if Chavi was polishing my husband’s image in my eyes in order to take my focus off Cingar. Still, she had given me plenty of other incentives not to entertain a romance with our dear captain. ‘I shall speak with him tonight.’

Chavi smiled. ‘The goddess will bless you for your consideration.’ She left me to stew in my disappointment.

Devere monopolised my thoughts following my talk with Chavi. I did not return to camp, but had taken a seat to watch the sunset, the gulf speckled with ships travelling to and from the nearby port.

I was considering that it might be better for all involved if I just booked myself on a boat leaving Marseilles and cover the rest of the distance to Cairo by sea. I had never travelled by ship over a long distance before, and so I had hoped to keep that part of the voyage as short as possible. But with what I was obliged to tell Cingar, I imagined that our relationship might be a little awkward and travelling together more of a strain than it had been to date.

The view was awe-inspiring and yet it could not lift the heaviness of my heart. As I considered that perhaps *somehow* Devere might be blameless in all this and that I could have harshly misjudged him, I wept. Then the memory that I had perceived from Devere’s mind the night I left him stopped the flow of tears.

The man I had seen threaten Lord Hereford was standing over my husband saying, ‘*Keep her safe, Devere. Learn about her, learn from her and keep me posted. If you can please this woman, you will become a very*

powerful man indeed. And, with any luck, you'll have many, many adept offspring.'

'You look like you could use this.'

I discovered Cingar was standing beside me, holding out a goblet of wine. 'I don't drink,' I declined, as I had every other time wine had been on offer.

'Sometimes it is best.' Cingar sat, and offered it to me again.

I felt as bad as ever I had and I knew a good cup of hot broth would serve me better. Yet, for some inexplicable reason, I accepted the goblet from him and took a sip. The red fluid warmed my frosty mood a little and I managed to smile.

'My grandmother has said something to upset you?' Cingar suggested—I assumed he'd seen us talking.

I shook my head, afraid to speak, lest I dissolve into tears again. Another sip of wine calmed my erratic emotions and I found my voice. 'I have a confession to make.'

'To me?' Cingar was surprised and unsure.

'My real name is Mrs Ashlee Devere.'

'You're married!' I heard the devastation in his voice, and yet he had a glimmer of hope that perhaps my husband was deceased. 'Where is your husband now?'

'In hot pursuit of us, most likely,' I said in all truthfulness. 'The Duc de Guise promised to stall him in Orleans as long as he could, but my husband will not be deceived long.'

'Why—'

'Am I running from him?' I anticipated the captain's query. 'Because he lied to me about something very important. Chavi seems to think I have judged him too harshly.'

'Hmmm...' Cingar was noncommittal, not wanting to say that his grandmother was seldom wrong in her soothsaying. 'Do you love this man?' The captain was ready to run off and slay him if I answered in the negative!

'I was falling deeply in love with him before I discovered his deceit. My doubt is more along the lines of, does he really love me?' I was annoyed when my tears began flowing. I never openly wept in front of anyone, and especially not over a man.

The captain hugged me comfortingly—never mind his own feelings that had just been crushed by my announcement.

I brushed away my tears and took a few more sips of wine. ‘I’m sorry I didn’t tell you the truth sooner. I had fancied that you might cast Devere out of my heart...I had no idea that such a scenario would see you banished by your people.’ I looked at the captain who nodded, his expression more serious than usual.

‘I was ready to trade my position for a life of travel with you. We all have our fantasies, and a desire to escape a mapped-out life.’ Cingar waved away his dream and my deception. Clearly he knew as well as I did that our romance could never happen, and perhaps he was even a little relieved to have been thwarted. ‘But reality has caught up with us, it seems.’ He kissed my forehead and in those last shadows of daylight we savoured a hug that would never amount to anything more than the comfort between good friends.

‘I feel certain that Chavi has picked you a fine wife.’ I attempted to fill the hole that had erupted in my heart by drinking the remaining wine in my goblet.

The captain took a deep breath and then, resigning himself to hope for the best, he released it. ‘Soon we will both be forced to confront the relationship we have been avoiding.’

‘But not tonight,’ I declared with relief.

‘No...tonight we are free!’ Cingar sprang to his feet. ‘Let us eat, drink and dance away our cares.’ He then offered me a hand, to help me up, which I accepted and accompanied him back toward the wonderful smells of food cooking.

It was impossible not to notice that the gypsy camp had doubled in size. When we returned to camp there were twice as many people, caravans and commotion than before.

‘What has happened?’ I asked of the captain.

‘It looks as if my in-laws might have arrived.’ Cingar squeezed my hand for strength and then let it go before we got too close to the camp. ‘So much for being free this evening.’

‘Then your bride is also here!’ I ribbed Cingar by sounding excited and curious.

‘Perhaps.’ He seemed unready to face that possibility. ‘What if I hate her?’ He pulled up short, savouring his last opportunity to avoid this whole affair.

‘The way I see it...if Chavi is as good a psychic as I credit her to be, then surely neither of us has anything to worry about.’ Did I believe what I was telling him? It didn’t matter. Cingar needed some positive persuasion and it seemed to work.

‘An excellent point, Mrs Devere,’ he smiled, appreciatively. ‘Wish me luck.’ He headed into the turbulence that had erupted in his absence.

I need not have worried about breaking Cingar’s heart. Not an hour after I had broken the news of my marital status to him, he was romancing one of the new arrivals through his heart-capturing talent on the violin.

Unfortunately, the girl who had captured his interest was not the captain’s intended—his bride would be arriving on the morrow, once her parents and Chavi had settled on a price for her.

The woman who had our good captain so enchanted was the younger sister of his bride and her name was Jessenia.

Even though a female, I could appreciate the beauty of this woman: she was strong and independent, chaste and level-headed. She was doing a marvellous job of appearing to be unimpressed with Cingar’s grandstanding, but I could see how her heart centre flushed with pink light and sparkled at his attentions. It was clear to me that Chavi had a whole new problem on her hands.

On the subject of new problems, it seemed I had one of my own the next morning when I awoke. My head was pounding and for a moment I had no idea where I was or what I was doing there. ‘Oooh...ouch...’

Let me congratulate you on your first hangover.

It was Albray who spoke and yet his voice was very faint, as if he was a vast distance away. I rolled over onto my back to look for him. ‘Albray? Where are you?’

I’m right in front of you.

My eyelids really didn’t want to venture too far apart, but I strained the burning eyeballs beneath. All I saw was the inside of the caravan. ‘What am I thinking?’ I saw Albray with my third eye, not my physical eyes, and

closing my eyelids to focus my inner eye I perceived my knight, arms folded, staring down at me, unimpressed. ‘You’re very faint,’ I observed.

I’m not the one who is vague today, he lectured. Please do me the courtesy of removing the stone from your person, so I do not have to tolerate YOUR splitting headache.

‘I’m so sorry.’ I felt guilt and remorse for having drunk so much last night. Watching Cingar romance another, and feeling nothing but happiness for him, had made me feel all the more that Devere had got the better of me again—I still loved him. I slid the stone’s chain from around my left wrist.

And as I can be of little use to you at present, you may as well dismiss me until you’re feeling more yourself.

‘You’re angry with me.’ I hadn’t played the reprimanded child for some time.

Yes, I am angry with you . . . the caravan is at leisure today. We could have finally had some time to work on your tuition, but no, you had to go and drown your senses in alcohol!

‘And you have never done that, I suppose?’ I mumbled in my own defence.

Albray got down off his high horse and sighed. *I just hate to see you make the same mistakes I did.*

‘Then why didn’t you say something last night?’ My query sparked another. ‘Where were you last night?’

Scouting, he said.

‘Scouting for what?’

For whom, rather.

‘For Devere?’

Albray gave a vague nod.

‘And did you find him?’

Albray shook his head, but I felt that he was either lying or not telling me the whole truth. Still, he had asked me not to handle the stone, so I couldn’t psychically check—not that my psychic senses were up to the challenge this morning anyway.

There was a knock on my caravan door. ‘Miss Winston. Are you awake?’

It was Cingar.

I looked at Albray who rolled his eyes and again requested to be dismissed.

I obliged my knight ahead of opening the door.

The sun was blinding. I had never known sunlight to be painful. I eventually focused on Cingar, and noted his dejected expression. 'Is something the matter, captain?'

'I am in love,' he announced, as if it were the end of the world.

'Jessenia?' I took a guess, which Cingar confirmed with a grave nod.

'What am I to do?' he appealed. 'You must help me.'

'But what can I do?' I raised a hand to support my throbbing head and shield my eyes from the light.

'You must help me convince my grandmother that she has brought me the wrong sister,' he said, knowing he had little chance of accomplishing the feat himself.

'How can you know that Chavi is wrong, when you are yet to meet your bride?' I attempted to reason with him.

'No! It is not possible that I could feel this way for another,' he insisted passionately. 'I know you must think me fickle, but I swear to you, I have never felt such fire for a woman that I should wish to forsake all others for the honour of having her for the rest of my days!'

'Shhh!' I urged him to keep his voice down for the sake of his own cause and my sore head. 'Why do you think Chavi will listen to me?'

'She has listened to you before,' he said.

'Only because I had the backing of one of your ancestors,' I pointed out.

'Could we not seek *her* advice?' Cingar suggested, rather excited by the prospect.

'Not as long as I have this headache,' I advised him.

'Sorry about that.' Cingar obviously felt responsible. 'I shall have one of the women fix you an infusion.'

'No alcohol,' I stipulated.

'I promise.' Cingar rushed off to see to my needs.

The remedy proved worse than the ailment. The infusion smelt very uninviting and had a gritty texture and fiery taste! As soon as the brew hit

my stomach I ran into the nearby cluster of trees to empty its contents several times over.

‘Oh, my,’ I uttered, breathless, as I staggered back to my caravan to wash my face in the tub of cold water there. ‘Well, that’s one way of getting the impurities out of my body.’

Cingar handed me a cloth with which to wipe my face. ‘Now you must drink this jug of water,’ he prescribed, pouring me a goblet.

In England, the water would be more lethal than the alcohol, but the gypsies boiled their drinking water, claiming the heat killed any impurities. This had been my reasoning for a good part of my life. The theory explained why broth, herbal infusions and tea made for safe drinking.

After I had consumed all the water, some bread and fresh fruit I felt distinctly better, although still somewhat seedy.

I instructed Cingar to wait outside while I spoke to Chiara, as I didn’t want to put her in an awkward position.

Upon my summons the old gypsy witch appeared and proceeded to thank me in several different languages for the deliverance of her menfolk from prison in Orleans. But when I asked her if she was aware why I had summoned her today, she just chuckled and nodded.

‘Do you have any advice for the captain?’

Chavi is wise. Tell him to trust her judgement.

‘But he claims to be in love with Jessenia,’ I said on his behalf. ‘Does his own judgement stand for nothing?’

It is the breeding that attracts him, the blood that runs in the veins of the family into which he is to marry.

‘The genetic makeup of the sisters is bound to be similar.’ I followed her reasoning. ‘So, are you saying that Cingar is lusting after Jessenia only because he recognises his future wife in her?’

Exactly!

Terrific! I thought. ‘How am I going to explain that to the captain?’

I exited my caravan to find Cingar and Chavi fervently debating the issue in question.

‘You nearly brought us all to ruin trying to avoid your responsibilities.’ Chavi was waving a finger at her grandson. ‘Time to grow up, Cingar, and stop seeking excuses—’

‘Jessenia is not an excuse!’ The captain dropped on one knee before his grandmother, so that she might see his sincerity. ‘I love her.’

‘Bah!’ Chavi waved off his declaration. ‘You have known her less than a day. By tonight, the woman I have chosen will hold your heart and none shall ever replace her. I have foreseen it.’

‘I don’t care what you have foreseen!’ Cingar was on his feet again and fuming. ‘This time, Chavi, you are wrong.’ Cingar spotted me and sought to enlist my support. ‘Tell her, Miss Winston.’

I really wanted to support his claim, but could not. ‘Chiara agreed with Chavi, captain. I’m sorry.’

The look of betrayal on his face broke my heart. ‘Are even the spirits against me?’ Cingar stormed off into his caravan and slammed the door closed.

Chavi was chuckling at his reaction.

‘Young people these days, no trust,’ she uttered in an aside to me, then moved off to see how the wedding preparations were going in the camp next door to ours. ‘Ah!’ She noted the incoming caravan. ‘This will be the bride now. Miss Winston, would you inform my brooding grandson that his presence is required?’ Chavi joined the rest of her family who were eager to meet the new lady who was arriving in the camp next door.

When I knocked on the captain’s door, he exited carrying a bundle. ‘I’m going to leave,’ he stated. ‘I am tired of having a deluded old woman run my life.’

‘Don’t be childish.’ I grabbed the bundle from him and cast it back into his caravan. ‘Of course you’re not! Too many people are depending on you.’

‘Don’t you start!’ he protested.

‘Look. I think that you owe it to Chavi to at least meet your bride. If you don’t like her then...then you can run away.’ The captain was very reluctant, and I could completely sympathise with his frustration and fear. ‘If you still feel the same way after you meet your bride, then I shall do all within my power to help convince Chavi of her mistake.’

Cingar smiled as he resigned himself to the agreement. ‘I would very much like to kiss you, Miss Winston.’

I shook my head. ‘I refuse to allow you to land yourself in trouble at this late stage of the game.’ I rose up onto my toes and kissed his cheek. ‘I

wish you peace, love, prosperity and happiness, Cingar, for it is surely what you deserve.'

'Stay by me, please,' he asked, casting his eyes past our deserted camp to the next.

'As long as need be,' I replied, accompanying the captain to meet his destiny.

Both clans were gathered around one of the caravans, and Cingar was cheered by the gathering as he made his appearance. He forced a smile of greeting and was courteous to all his well-wishers.

The captain went to stand next to Chavi, who introduced him to his prospective father-in-law and mother-in-law, Beval and Carmen, who had been closeted with Chavi all of the previous evening.

'Where is Jessenia?' Cingar wondered why she was not present.

'We did not think it appropriate that she attend,' her father replied sternly. Obviously, Jessenia had also protested to the marriage of Cingar to her sister and I felt for them both.

'Time to introduce you to your truly intended.' Beval directed Cingar's attention to the closed door of the bridal caravan, whereupon the gathering all began chanting for the bride's presence.

The caravan door was flung open and in the doorway stood a plump girl who bore no resemblance to Jessenia whatsoever. She waved at Cingar, smiling sweetly, while the captain looked at his grandmother, horrified. 'Please,' he muttered aside to her, 'you are joking?'

The bride's father caught the comment and his face went red in rage before he burst out laughing, as did all the new arrivals and Chavi. 'Yes, it is a joke.' Beval slapped his son-in-law's arm to reassure him, then turned the captain's head with his hand so that Cingar could note that Jessenia followed the first maiden from the bridal caravan.

'I don't understand?' Cingar was bemused. 'Are your daughters twins?'

'We have only one daughter, Cingar,' Beval placed a hand on the captain's shoulder to express his sincerity, 'and she has set her heart on you.'

When Cingar looked at Jessenia and her smile and nod allayed all his fears, my eyes flooded with tears of happiness for them both.

‘What did I say?’ Chavi posed to me, as Cingar kissed his intended.

‘You are so cruel.’ I voiced my view of her game.

‘Not so,’ she defended. ‘I just know my grandson...he will never commit to anything that he does not feel was his own idea.’

‘So,’ Beval asked the young couple, ‘shall there be a wedding here tomorrow?’

The confirmation of the event was unanimous!

FROM THE HONEYMOON JOURNAL OF LADY SUSAN DEVERE

We befriended and bribed many officials between Orleans and Marseilles in order to finally track down the gypsy caravan that we suspected Ashlee was travelling with.

We had our carriage stop some way from the gypsy camp, behind a cluster of trees, where we contemplated our next move.

Lord Devere was all for riding straight up to the camp and confronting our dear sister with the truth.

‘If she doesn’t see us coming and run off again,’ Mr Devere argued. ‘It has taken so long to find her I don’t want to scare her off before I get a chance to explain myself.’

‘Could I make a suggestion?’

The Devere men had drawn pistols and taken aim before I had even spotted the gypsy fellow who stood peering in our carriage window.

‘Please, gentlemen,’ he smiled, warmly. ‘I am to be wed tomorrow and have no desire to die.’

‘Who are you?’ I asked, rather well disposed toward the handsome vagabond.

‘I am Cingar Choron, the captain of this band,’ he announced.

‘Then you know the whereabouts of Miss Ashlee Winston,’ Mr Devere stated, without lowering his pistol.

‘And you must be Devere.’ Cingar kept his good humour.

‘My wife has mentioned me?’ Mr Devere was surprised.

‘As the man who broke her heart,’ Cingar said bluntly and Devere lowered the gun, hurt by the truth of it.

‘So, she does despise me,’ he concluded sadly.

‘No, quite the contrary,’ Cingar said cheerily and gave a big grin—he was an odd, but very likeable fellow.

Devere’s spirits lifted and he exited the carriage quickly to speak with the gypsy. ‘Would you take me to her?’

Cingar laughed at his proposal. ‘Hardly. I am her friend, she is my saviour and *you* have yet to convince me of your good intentions.’

‘Mr Choron.’ I thought to speak up for my dear brother.

‘Lovely lady,’ he flattered as he awarded me his full attention.

I do declare I forgot what I was going to say for a moment. ‘I have known Ashlee...Miss Winston, for ten years; there is no greater friend to her than I. Thus, I can assure you that there has been a terrible misunderstanding, and my dear friend could be in grave danger. She needs Mr Devere close to her, whether she realises it or not. Won’t you help us? Please.’

‘My lady, *you* I believe.’ Cingar pondered on my request. ‘This morning I was subjected to a clever masquerade that worked out rather well for all involved...and it gives me an idea.’

A beautiful gypsy woman joined Cingar; they must have been out walking when they spotted our carriage. He introduced his intended to us and then asked Jessenia if she would mind inviting a mysterious long-lost friend to their wedding, and motioned to Devere.

‘Mysterious?’ Devere grinned as he protested, not too comfortable with the suggestion. ‘How do you mean?’

Jessenia laughed at the prospect of disguising the English gentleman. ‘Some new clothes, another language, a mask, pierce his ear...’ She threw up her hands. ‘I would not recognise him.’

‘No,’ Devere declined. ‘My wife already feels I have deceived her, and she will see straight through a disguise.’

‘Your wife’s psychic skills are a little tainted today,’ Cingar explained. ‘Hangover.’

‘Ashlee got drunk!’ I could hardly believe it. ‘She never drinks alcohol!’

‘I am to blame,’ Cingar confessed, ‘but how fortunate for you... everything happens for a reason.’ The gypsy captain looked back to Devere, who still appeared hesitant. ‘Get close to her, get her alone, and then

explain,' Cingar said. 'If I take you into camp as you are, Miss Winston will flee and never trust either of us again.'

Devere wrestled with the notion a bit longer and looked to me for advice.

'What have you got to lose?' I asked him.

'I know about the affairs of love,' Cingar boasted and I didn't doubt it. 'There is nothing like a wedding to soften a woman's heart.'

'It's true.' I seconded Cingar's reasoning.

'All right.' Devere resigned himself to the plan with a smile of gratitude.

'I feel it best that you come alone,' Cingar advised. 'Your companions might give you away.'

'Not a worry.' Lord Devere spoke up for us. 'A couple of nights in Marseilles won't be too hard to bear.' My husband served me a wink. 'We'll leave word at the British Embassy where to find us.'

'Give Ashlee my love,' I requested, feeling a little teary now that our journey was drawing to a close. 'Tell her to come and see me, once you've set everything to rights.'

'Go and enjoy yourselves,' Devere bade us. 'I've ruined your honeymoon long enough.'

'Poppycock!' Lord Devere rejected his claim. 'This is one holiday we shall never forget.'

LESSON 15

MASQUERADE

FROM THE TRAVEL JOURNALS OF MRS ASHLEE DEVERE

The weather could not have been finer for an outdoor wedding.

There had been a few new arrivals in the camp overnight—wedding guests I was told—and among them was a masked man.

He was dressed in black, including the mask that had small slits to see by. It covered the top half of his face and tied at the back of his neck. The ponytail that sprouted from his head cover in one long curl at the nape of his neck was dark blond, and his skin was fairer than that of his gypsy companions. Still, his physique was just as fetching as any of the gypsy men's and he seemed a carefree soul. He carried a pistol and a sword, as I did, and spoke only Italian, so he was not a Rom. His light-body was very beautiful, although there was a brooding dark mass around his heart. Judging from the extended size of his light-body I had to assume that this man was rather psychic.

'Hmmm, interesting.' I attended to my broth and bread. 'What do you know about him?' I asked Chavi who was sitting beside me.

'He is part of the bride's party,' Chavi informed me, but then, gazing at the masked man, she said, 'Tis seldom you see a man that psychic with a broken heart.'

'I noticed that, too. I wonder what the mask is for?'

'He could be disfigured,' Chavi suggested, 'or hiding from someone.' She seemed more disposed toward this theory. 'Interesting, as you say.'

I'm afraid our curiosity was rather obvious, for Cingar brought the new arrival over to meet us.

'This is my grandmother, Chavi, the woman responsible for today's event,' Cingar was telling the man in black. 'And this wonderful woman saved me from the Duc de Guise...Miss Winston. Ladies, may I introduce Danior Terkari, a long-time associate of Jessenia's family.'

‘So, you are the woman who vanquished the best swordsman in Orleans.’ Terkari took up my hand and kissed it; even his leather gloves were black. ‘This is a rare honour.’

I noticed the dark spot on the man’s heart lighten a little. I felt his attraction and it frightened and excited me at once. ‘You know all about me and yet I know nothing about you, sir.’

‘There is little in my past worth telling.’ He let go of my hand and looked at Chavi. ‘But perhaps Chavi would do me the service of telling me something of my future?’ he asked lightheartedly. ‘I have been hearing of your talent as an oracle. I would be happy to pay you, of course.’

The old gypsy’s frown lifted. ‘Would you like a private reading?’ She smiled her toothy grin.

‘I have nothing to hide.’ Terkari took a seat beside Chavi at the campfire and removed one of his gloves.

‘Then why the mask?’ I queried and was sorry that I mentioned it, because Terkari’s joviality lessened considerably.

‘I was speaking metaphorically,’ he replied, managing to regain his smile as he offered his hand to Chavi.

He must be disfigured, I thought, and yet I was sure such a wound would register on his light-body, to some extent at least. I felt awful for raising the subject in any case, damn my curiosity. Still, remorse didn’t stop me from staying to hear what Chavi had to say about the mysterious fellow. Of course, I was tempted to peek inside his thoughts, but after my experience with Devere I decided that people’s thoughts best remained their own. If I had been any other woman, I would still be living in blissful ignorance with a man who made me deeply content and happy.

‘You are very psychic yourself,’ Chavi began, and then raised both eyebrows in surprise. ‘However...this is only a recent development for you.’

Terkari nodded to confirm this.

The old woman closed her eyes briefly, and then gasped, looking at me before her attention darted back to the man she was reading for. She seemed a little hesitant to go on.

‘Please continue,’ Terkari urged.

‘A woman’s love ails you deeply. I’ve never felt such mourning for the love of another.’ Tears filled Chavi’s eyes. ‘She has made you doubt your

worthiness, but you are most worthy. She has no idea of the precious gift she has forsaken in you.’ The old gypsy let go of his hand, and sniffled back her emotions to kiss his cheek. ‘So sad, but,’ she held up a finger, ‘you will love again, and soon.’

It was a short reading, but it had me teary and even Cingar was all choked up. It was hard to tell how Terkari felt about the prediction. Was he in tears under that mask?

‘Your reassurance is a great light in my heart.’ He reached for his money pouch, but Chavi wouldn’t have it.

‘That promise comes free of charge.’ She rose and departed to ready herself for the wedding.

‘Well, that’s dampened the mood.’ Terkari attempted to disperse the heavy sentiment of the moment. ‘Curiosity killed the cat.’

‘At least it was good news.’ I encouraged him to look on the bright side and his smile warmed. Damn, now I was even more intrigued, and I felt a kind of electricity passing between us. *Oh no*, I warned myself, *I am sworn off men*.

The captain made me promise to take care of his new friend. I think Cingar was trying to play matchmaker, and I didn’t need any persuasion to keep Danior Terkari company.

I had never much enjoyed singing, dancing and parties of a formal nature, but I had never before had the pleasure of attending a celebration so joyous and rowdy as this one. I danced until I was dizzy and was more deeply under the spell of my mysterious companion as every hour passed.

When evening fell the celebration showed no sign of winding up, but I swore I could not dance or laugh any more—surely it was illegal to have so much fun in one day.

The sound of guns firing raised a cry that the caravan was under attack. Panic seized my heart as horsemen began riding through the camp, firing weapons and wielding swords. All I could think was that I didn’t have Albray’s stone on me. It was in my caravan and I immediately ran to fetch it.

Terkari called after me to stay by him, but was forced to draw his sword and engage an oncoming mounted attacker.

Between myself and my caravan a rider reared on his horse to challenge me. Without Albray, my sword was useless, so I pulled my pistol and fired across the front of the horse. The near miss startled the animal, and it threw its rider to the ground. In the commotion I darted past him.

I scampered into my caravan, only to be wrenched off my feet before reaching the stone. I kicked my attacker with my free leg, but he refused to release me and as I was dragged back to the door I held my hand out toward the stone and willed it to me with all the determination I could muster.

The item slapped into my grasp. *Albray, Albray, Albray!*

I was finally yanked outside, but as my attacker turned me to face him, my being filled with all the strength and stamina of my knight.

‘A woman,’ laughed the man, surprised and delighted.

‘*Oui.*’ I noted he was French, so I smiled sweetly and belted him right between the eyes.

‘Miss Winston! Behind you!’ cried Terkari as he ran to my aid.

I drew my sword and turned to confront a mounted opponent charging at full speed toward me. To my surprise he did not raise a weapon against me, but was reaching out to grab hold of me. Albray did not hesitate to take his lower arm off as he passed, and he rode from the camp screaming.

‘Are you all right?’ Terkari reached me, looking stunned that a woman could strike such a blow.

No, I was not all right, but, thankfully, I did not have control of my body. ‘Never better,’ replied Albray on my behalf. ‘And you? Duck!’

Terkari had quick reflexes. He dropped to one knee and Albray engaged the sword of the man we had punched earlier. It didn’t take long for Albray to disarm the fellow and with a kick up the behind, Albray sent him running after his handless friend.

Terkari had grabbed the discarded sword and was in the process of fending off two swordsmen at once. *Fairly impressive*, Albray mused quietly, but I heard him and those were my sentiments exactly. We were hesitant to give Terkari any assistance, as he seemed to be having too much fun.

I heard the hooves too late to turn and I was snatched up into the air by one of the riders. He was surprised to be belted so hard and dropped me on the ground.

‘Come on,’ Albray challenged, sword raised and ready to strike, as the rider turned his horse around. ‘You can be handless, just like your friend.’

Clearly the bandits were losing the battle, and as most of his associates had already withdrawn, the rider wisely decided not to accept Albray’s offer.

A loud cheer sounded from the gypsy camp as the bandits were driven off. Albray departed my form at once, leaving my heart thumping in my throat and my body shaking from the shock.

‘Miss Winston.’ Terkari was at my side at once and caught me up when my knees threatened to buckle beneath me. ‘You need to lie down.’

I nodded to agree and pointed him toward my caravan. Unwittingly, I had placed myself in a very compromising position.

There I was, laid out on my bed, Terkari seated beside me wiping my head with a damp cloth. I was noting how gentle he was for a man so fearless, noble and forbearing in spirit—all fine qualities that I had never seen in Devere.

‘The day has been rather enjoyable apart from that last adventure,’ he commented.

‘Yes...I haven’t had so much fun in forever.’ I looked away for only a second as I considered how true my statement was and when I glanced back his lips were but a breath away. I wanted to return his kiss and put Devere from my mind forever, but when it came right down to it, I urged Terkari back. ‘I’m sorry.’

‘No, don’t be,’ he assured me rather oddly, as if he was more relieved than bothered by my rejection.

‘Please don’t be offended...as much as I don’t want to be, I am a married woman.’ I was relieved to get that off my chest. When would I learn to kill these attractions before they started and not wait until they burned out of control? ‘I still love him, you see.’ A tear escaped my eye and I brushed it away, frustrated by how much Devere haunted me.

‘Then why do you persist in keeping us apart when it makes us both so miserable?’ Terkari said in English and I recognised his voice.

The shock struck me witless a second. ‘Devere?’

He removed the mask and forced a very sweet smile.

‘Are you testing me?’ I was referring to the kiss and shoved him off my bed.

‘I forgot that I wasn’t myself for an instant,’ he defended.

‘Did you have anything to do with that attack?’ I demanded, getting to my feet. Now that I thought about it, I didn’t see the attackers take anything. They looked more like they were searching for something. ‘Those men seemed awfully keen to cart me off somewhere.’

‘Yes, I noticed,’ Devere impressed on me. ‘They belonged to the Order of Sion, which I have nothing to do with. Perhaps your friend in Paris sent them after you.’

I took offence at his tone and implication. ‘Molier locked me in a room on your behalf,’ I pointed out, glad that he’d raised the subject of Christian Molier. ‘So, whose friend was he again?’

‘Please, Ashlee,’ Devere appealed, weary of fighting. ‘I have pursued you for weeks just to talk to you. Won’t you please hear what I have to say?’

‘And how do I know you are not just feeding me more lies?’ I was angry as I recalled why I had left him. ‘Keep her safe, Devere. Learn about her, learn from her and keep me posted. If you can *please* this woman, you will become a very powerful man!’

Devere was devastated that I had perceived that particular memory. ‘I know it looks bad, but you were my choice. I was fighting for your hand in marriage long before you ever knew I existed.’

The fire in his eyes struck at my heart and I crumpled. ‘I so want to believe you...’

‘Then take my hand, scan my mind and know it all,’ he offered, ‘just as Chavi did.’

‘I am the woman that she was speaking of.’ Recalling Chavi’s reading, my tears welled again. That was why he’d had Chavi read for him in front of me when they’d first met, so that I would know it had not been prearranged—not that any amount of money would cause Chavi to betray me. Devere had been clever enough to know that there was no better assertion of his love—I would always believe the word of a fellow psychic. I had been touched by Chavi’s description of this man’s deep feelings for his beloved and I forgot my anger, suspicion and pride, and kissed him.

‘I didn’t know that you suspected my Grand Master of killing Hereford,’ he confessed between kisses. ‘I swear to you, I would never have allowed it.’

‘I believe you,’ I assured him, encouraging him to cease talking and free his lips for other pursuits.

In retrospect, it was a great relief that Devere and Terkari were one and the same man, for now I could have the pleasure of loving them both.

I did adore life this morning.

To awake warm and snug in my lover’s arms held a kind of security that I’d never envisaged before. For the first time in my life I understood what home really meant and, instead of feeling trapped as I always imagined I would, I felt a deep sense of belonging and contentment.

It was most fortunate that everyone in the gypsy camp was so inebriated during the wedding celebrations, as we emerged from my caravan to hear talk of objects being spotted floating around my abode late last night.

I’m sure the red flush on our cheeks did not increase people’s faith in our plea of disbelief.

‘You know, I believe you folks need to abstain from the drink for a while,’ I said, to take the heat off us.

‘Yes.’ Devere backed me up. ‘I fear the excitement has gone to your heads.’ He wound a finger around beside his ear, to imply they had all gone a little loopy.

Chavi approached me, looking pleased that Devere was unmasked this morning, and I noticed her son was headed our way too. ‘I told you love would catch up with you,’ the old gypsy ribbed me.

‘Yes, you did,’ I was happy to concede.

‘You both hang on tighter from now on,’ she suggested, and we both assured her that we intended to follow her advice. Chavi wandered off to be about her chores.

‘It fills my heart with joy to see you together,’ Cingar stated, his arms flung wide as he embraced us both, ‘and that you were both unharmed by the raiders last night.’

‘Were there many casualties?’ I pulled back from the group hug.

‘A few scratches and bruises.’ Cingar shrugged and then smiled. ‘We gypsies are not unaccustomed to such raids.’

‘So you think they were thieves?’ Devere noted. ‘Was anything stolen?’

‘No,’ Cingar announced proudly. ‘They must have been counting on the celebrations dulling our senses...even drunk we proved a formidable force.’

Devere was frowning, for he knew that the raiders were no ordinary band of thieves. Then he released an unexpected cry of pain and gripped his head, as if he’d just been struck down with a massive headache.

‘What is the matter?’ I besought him, but Devere stepped away from me, his thoughts focused inward.

‘James!’ He called out his brother’s name, sounding alarmed for his wellbeing.

I moved to inquire after my husband’s concerns, when I noticed Albray appear beside me. *Where have you been? Do you know what is ailing Devere?*

Albray nodded, horrified.

‘Lady Devere has been kidnapped!’ My husband emerged from his harrowing vision to impart his news. ‘My brother has been bound, gagged and left somewhere!’ Devere looked at me, with determination and frustration on his face. ‘I have to find him! I must leave at once.’

‘We must leave at once,’ I corrected, as the news of my dear friend’s kidnapping sent shockwaves through my body.

‘I shall have horses prepared.’ Cingar jumped into action, whistling to entreat the aid of some of his men.

It is Molier who has taken your friend, Albray advised, his voice filled with spite.

‘What would Molier want with Susan?’ I asked Albray, and in my rush to obtain answers I completely forgot that my knight was not physically present.

Since he could not take you by force last night, maybe he figured it was easier to have you follow him of your own accord?

‘Our dear sister is also of the blood,’ Devere informed me, curiously eyeing over the spot where my attention was focused.

I gasped. ‘Really?’

He nodded. ‘Although her line is not as strong as yours, she is still a Grail princess.’

‘But why is Molier so interested in the women of my bloodline?’ I looked at Devere who shrugged, and then at Albray.

I suspect Molier has the Fire-Stone vial, my knight announced, giving this information for the first time without so much as blinking an eye.

I gasped, having little idea of what this meant to my own mission. I felt a deep foreboding in my gut.

‘Are you talking about the fabled Star and Fire vials alleged to contain the ambrosia of the gods, and that were mysteriously self-filling?’ Devere inquired of Albray.

I gasped again upon realising that Devere was aware of my knight. I was also stunned that he knew about the vials, and more than I did, obviously. I had not noted that the Star substance in my vial was self-replenishing and I was dying to check my secret treasure to see whether the dose I’d given the Duc de Guise’s son had indeed replaced itself. ‘How do you know about the vials?’

All the brothers know of them, Albray answered for him. *Though there is much more to these vials than lowly initiates like us are ever told. For example, I could tell you that the temple complex from which the vials originate can only be opened by a daughter of the blood.*

I was speechless. Why had Albray not told me this before?

‘That does seem to explain Molier’s interest in my wife and Lady Susan,’ Devere conceded.

‘But I thought Molier was going to Italy?’

‘It is just as easy, if not easier, to reach Rome by sea,’ Devere pointed out.

‘I realise that, but why kidnap Susan? Unless Molier plans on going to the temple complex in the Sinai.’

Exactly, Albray said.

‘He only has one of the vials, you said,’ Devere pointed out. ‘Without the other vial, what good would the journey do him? Unless he believes the other vial is still hidden within the complex?’

‘Hmmm.’ I saw Devere’s point all too clearly, but I was not ready to confess my little secret...which had damn near been uncovered during our flight of passion last night! Fortunately, I’d managed to remove the vial from my person and hide it before my husband could discover it.

‘Does Molier suspect where the other vial is hidden?’ I sought Albray’s opinion, and he nodded without saying more, lest Devere discover my secret.

‘Perhaps we can get to it first?’ Devere suggested.

‘Perhaps.’ To avoid the subject I decided I should introduce my two favourite men to each other. ‘Albray, meet Mr Devere, who fought alongside us last night as the masked bandit, Danior Terkari. Mr Devere, I’d like you to meet my skill with a sword, Albray.’

The two men became rather uncomfortable with each other after my introduction. It seemed to make them uneasy that they liked each other better than either would have expected.

‘I thank you for taking such good care of my wife during our misunderstanding,’ Devere ventured.

Albray waved off the gratitude. *That is my job.*

Devere was slightly disturbed by the claim. I knew he felt that it was *his* job to protect me.

‘I called Albray to my service before we ever became involved,’ I advised my husband, hoping to avoid any unpleasantness, but the look on Devere’s face told me that I’d just made matters worse.

‘You’ve been advising my wife all along,’ Devere said, sounding a little hurt and annoyed.

Only insofar as her psychic skills are concerned, Albray corrected my husband’s misunderstanding. *In matters of the heart I have always pleaded ignorance.*

I smiled, amused by his comeback. ‘That is very true.’

I can aid you to find your brother, Albray added, as further comfort. *It seems that we now have a common cause.*

‘To protect my wife?’ Devere presumed.

Albray nodded. ‘And defeat Molier.’

My husband appeared a little confused by the conviction underlying Albray’s statement.

‘Albray and Molier have a history,’ I explained. In truth, I had yet to learn the story behind the dispute.

Devere looked at Cingar and his men, and was surprised to find that they’d readied several more horses than we needed. The port of Marseilles was but a short ride away. Devere was even more surprised to spy Nanny Beat approaching with bags in hand.

‘Mrs Winston.’ He acknowledged my maidservant and drew my attention to her approach.

The three gypsy girls she'd been caring for were begging her not to go, and she seemed torn between her duty to me and her affection for them.

'Nanny, you are as psychic as me sometimes, I swear.'

She nodded astutely. 'I am ready, when you are.'

How the woman could ignore the three weeping girls hanging from her skirts was beyond me. 'Dear Nanny.' I touched her cheek, and in that moment she knew that I was releasing her from her duty to me, and her face filled with both sadness and relief.

'No, mistress.' She urged me to reconsider. 'I so wanted to be Nanny to your children.'

I smiled at her sentiment, thinking she'd be waiting a while to fulfil that wish, if I had any say in the matter. 'If I find myself in need, I shall track you down. Will you return to England, or stay with the Chorons?'

The way the three girls cheered and danced about I figured I had the answer and Nanny's smile confirmed it. 'May your spirits keep you safe from ill, just as they always have.' Nanny hugged me tight.

'You are the best friend, adviser and mother that anyone could ask for. Thank you for getting me this far.' I kissed her cheek, and the three girls began dragging Nanny and her possessions back to their caravan.

Cingar, Jessenia and several of the gypsy men rode toward us, towing our mounts along behind them. 'We should make haste,' Cingar advised.

'We should make haste?' I queried why Cingar, and several of his people, were including themselves in this mission.

'I owe you my life,' Cingar informed me, 'and I vowed to see you safely to the sea. I have connections at the docks and abroad who will prove most useful.'

'You cannot leave your people without a captain.' I insisted that he was going beyond the call of duty.

'They are under Beval's protection and will journey to Italy with him. I know where I can rejoin them at any given time,' Cingar said. 'We Chorons pay our debts.'

'You owe no debt—' I attempted to release him.

'Not only are you wasting your breath,' Cingar cut me off, 'but we are wasting precious time.'

'Wait.' I remembered Hereford's journal and ran quickly back to my lodgings to grab it, among other things.

I pulled the Star vial from its hiding place beneath my bedcovers and, to my great amazement, it was indeed filled to the stopper again with the mysterious white glowing substance. ‘Well, I’ll be.’ Still, there was no time to ponder the mystery. I placed the vial in its usual hiding place, then grabbed Hereford’s book and the bottle of foul-smelling insect repellent that I’d found in the back of the hollow red book. I tossed these in a bag with a few other personal effects and bade farewell to my comfortable little caravan.

Perhaps the hasty goodbye was for the best. I had grown so fond of my gypsy friends that parting from them would have been far more difficult had my best friend and her husband not been in great peril. I had no time to think of my own feelings and, before the sorrow of departing had come upon me, I was halfway to the port of Marseilles.

The sound of choppers overhead compelled me to place aside Ashlee’s journal.

Outside my tent I found Akbar and his two charges staring up into the vast blue sky.

‘Is Andre back already?’ I queried, shielding my eyes to get a look at the incoming craft. To my surprise I saw two large helicopters airlifting a huge freight container our way. ‘Surely that is not the shipment of white powder I ordered?’ If it was, the amount I’d been sent was rather excessive.

‘It is Molier,’ Akbar said surely and then looked my way. ‘I told you he would come.’

I stared back at him, praying to god that Akbar was wrong, when Kadar and Kamali yelled a warning to us to get out of the way.

The choppers had bypassed the helipad and were positioning themselves right over where we were standing. We retreated to watch the large container lower to the ground in front of us with a thud. The choppers then detached their towlines and returned to whence they’d come. In the wake of the commotion, a deathly silence ensued, or it certainly felt so by comparison.

The container had a door, which seemed to indicate that it was for habitation, but there was not a single window.

You should return to your tent, Mia, Albray advised as he appeared beside me. Molier won’t be able to exit the container until after sundown.

And then what will I do? I felt so unprepared. I still didn't know half of what I felt I needed to know to confront Molier. I had to get back to Ashlee's story and finish it.

I had no sooner turned toward the tent when the sound of the container door opening behind me scared me to a standstill—I was almost too afraid to turn.

'Dr Montrose?'

Surprised to hear a female voice, my apprehension lessened and I turned to see a young woman walking toward me who was French judging by her accent. She was petite and dressed for an office in a suit, French bun, makeup and sensible boots.

'Hello, I am Tusca Resi, Mr Molier's private secretary.' She held a hand out and I shook it, then she kissed me on both my cheeks. 'Mr Molier has been greatly looking forward to meeting you.'

I am certain about that. Albray voiced what Akbar and I were both thinking.

'My employer suggests that you might like to join him for dinner this evening, which will give you time to read this.' Tusca pulled an old double-ended scroll from under her arm and held it out to me.

The wooden handles on the rods of the ancient text were ornately carved. The parchment was bound tight around one rod of the scroll and then secured to the matching rod at the top of the document. These were then bound to each other by a piece of red leather.

'What is this?' I accepted it, curious, and glancing to Albray to see what he made of this development I was alarmed to see his shocked expression.

'I could not tell you,' Tusca informed me, 'but Mr Molier assured me that it would be of particular interest to you.'

'I see. Well, thank Mr Molier for me.'

'Would six o'clock this evening suit you for dinner?' Tusca inquired and when I nodded she retreated to inform her employer.

'You should not have agreed,' Akbar said once Molier's secretary was out of earshot.

'He's my employer, Akbar.' I looked at the Arab in appeal. 'What would you have had me say?' When he gave no further comment, I headed

for my tent. 'If I am not prepared to hear everyone's view regarding this excavation, then how am I to know I am getting the whole truth?'

'That creature twists the truth.' Akbar followed me and, gently grabbing hold of one of my shoulders, he brought me to a standstill to heed his words face to face. 'Whatever he tells you, you may rest assured that just the opposite is true.'

'Later, Akbar.' I decided I wasn't having this debate right now. I had way too much reading to do.

Inside my tent, Albray was just as discouraging. *Please, Mia, do not read that document, Molier is trying to discredit me in your eyes.*

My knight seemed overly dramatic, but in his thought conveyance I could hear and feel his distress. *Do you recognise this?* I held the scroll toward him and he nodded.

It is the journal of Lillet du Lac. He seemed almost nauseated when telling me this.

'But I—' I pulled myself up before speaking out loud. *I thought you were in love with her?*

I was... He seemed at a loss to explain for a second. *But that does not mean that the feeling was mutual, for as I have already informed you, it was not.* Albray was frustrated. *You must understand Cathar belief to understand the woman who wrote this account, for I did not understand her for a long time and in the interim we had...a few clashes.*

Have you read this document, Albray? I asked, feeling that he might be getting worked up over nothing.

I don't have to read it, Albray barked, walking off his frustration for a few paces to collect himself. *I was there.*

Albray, my employer has asked me to read this and is probably going to test me on it over dinner. This was a joke, but Albray was not amused. *Nothing could ever taint my high opinion of you. If this account is scathing, then I must concede this woman did not know you as well as I do.*

Clearly, Albray knew that nothing he could say was going to stop me reading the homework I'd been given. *Then please dismiss me,* he requested, *but you must promise to call me to you before you go anywhere near Molier.*

Of course I shall call you. The idea of going alone was laughable.
Promise.

His insistence had me worried; what the hell did he expect me to find in this manuscript? I *promise*.

I dismissed Albray before untying the red leather that bound the scroll closed.

It unfolded to reveal a large emblem, crowned by the title of the House of du Lac. The stamped emblem was scarlet red in colour and portrayed a dragon emerging from a lake with a lily in its mouth, which was contained inside the emblem of a five-pointed star. It was highly detailed and very impressive. The parchment had obviously been reinforced by some modern backing paper, which had prevented the old document from crumbling to pieces.

The text itself was in an old dialect, D'oc, that had been employed in the south of France around the time of the Crusades. D'oc was related to the provinces of Languedoc. I had a couple of computer programs that I could refer to if I found it difficult to follow the language. The penmanship was beautiful from the outset, and a pleasure to read.

'So, tell me your story, Lillet du Lac.' I settled at my desk with a cup of tea and some nibbles. I switched on my computer in case I needed to research a word, or anything else, and then began to devour the story of the Cathar priestess and my Knight of Sion.

PART 3

LILLET

13TH CENTURY

FRANCE

LESSON 16

PERSECUTION

DECEMBER 31ST 1243

I am Lillet of the House of du Lac, a priestess of the Church of the Holy Mother, and a daughter of the blood of the Royal House of Judah. In Narbonne, my family have resided since the kingdom once known as Septimania thrived. It was to here that my great foremother, Mary Magdalene, came when fleeing the Holy Land with her children to preserve the royal line of David. Down through the centuries my family has fought to reclaim their rightful title. For a brief time in the eighth century, my forefather, Theodoric, was decreed by King Pepin of the Franks, by the Caliph of Baghdad and even by the Pope, to be a true king of the House of Judah and the seed of the royal house of David.

A fact that the Church of Rome has since tried very hard to conceal throughout the centuries.

For eight months our one hundred and fifty warriors have held at bay a force of ten thousand men, preventing the Frankish force from scaling the high *pog* upon which the fortress of Montségur is perched. This mountain is riddled with secret caves and pathways, which has enabled supplies to trickle in and communications to be sent out. But our besiegers tighten their defence and access to the outside world is becoming harder to maintain.

Montségur has been besieged before and barely has a scar to show for it, but this time I fear Hugues de Archis and his Crusaders, by order of King Louis IX and the Inquisition, mean to topple the last bastion of the 'Church of God' left in Occitania, no matter how long it takes.

Tens of thousands of our people have been slaughtered since the dawn of this century, when Simon de Montford, Dominic Guzmàn and thirty thousand Crusader knights descended on Languedoc like a dark plague, destroying everyone and everything in their path. Finding it difficult to

separate Roman Catholics from the Christians and *Perfecti* of our church, the Crusaders were commanded to ‘kill them all, as God would know his own’.

Over fifteen thousand people were massacred in the town of Béziers alone, many of whom were inside the church of Mary Magdalene, where they prayed for deliverance. The church was set ablaze and all were burned alive—neither sex, nor age, nor rank were spared.

This horrendous event took place ten years before I was born. I cannot remember a time when my people did not live in fear of their lives, their faith and their souls. And for what purpose has the Church of Rome hunted and slaughtered our people? The answer is simple: our faith, our knowledge, our history is a threat to them for we have in our possession something more meaningful than the advent of any faith. The church and its crusader knights have already destroyed most of the principality of Occitania in search of this treasure. Perpignan, Carcassonne, Toulouse and Narbonne have all been laid to waste and the few survivors fled here to Montségur. As it is the last stronghold of gnostic thought and study in Occitania, our persecutors have assumed that the ancient treasure is hidden in Montségur—the Inquisition and its crusaders will not stop until this fortress has been searched and levelled.

In the year 1241, Montségur was besieged by Raymond VII, the Count of Toulouse. He sympathised with our faith, and only half-heartedly surrounded our fortress when he was forced to by the king of the Franks to whom he had pledged allegiance after the fall of his city. All lines of trade remained open and our people felt no threat from the count’s forces. By autumn that siege had all but dissolved.

In spring 1242, Raymond d’Alfaro, the bailiff at Avignonet, sent a letter to the Lord of Montségur, Pierre-Roger Mirepoix. This communiqué advised that the chief Inquisitors of Toulouse—Etienne de Saint, Guillaume Arnaud and their assistants—were going to be arriving in Avignonet in a few days. Since the formation of the dreaded Holy Inquisition in 1233, the Church of Rome has inflicted torture and death on thousands of our people. Our lord and his loyal supporters did not hesitate to hatch a plan to destroy the party of friars before they could inflict their toll on the faithful of Avignonet.

As the *Perfecti*—the church leaders—of our faith reject all violence, we advised against the attack and the drawing of more ill will to our community. Yet our lord and his men, being *Credenti* (believers) and hardened warriors, refused to allow another bloody incursion to take place in the name of the Church of Rome.

Our lord assembled a force of knights in the Antioch woods. Guillaume de Lahille, Bernard de Saint-Martin and Guillaume de Balaguire led a force into Avignonet under the cover of darkness. Our assassins were guided to the quarters where the Inquisitors were sleeping and the ten friars therein were disposed of. It was said that there was not a skull among the dead that was whole enough to take as a trophy and drink a victory toast from.

This massacre was considered a victory by our men-at-arms, as there were widespread revolts in Occitania against the Crown following the assassinations. But by January 1243, Frankish forces allied to Rome had put down the revolution.

The fort at Montségur was dubbed ‘the synagogue of Satan’ and on the day of the Feast of the Ascension in May 1243, which marked the anniversary of the assassinations of the church’s Inquisitors, warriors from Gascony and Aquitaine began to pour into the valley below Montségur.

By the last day of the year of 1243, several attempts had been made by our enemies to scale the *Roc de la Tour*, our first major defensive position on the mount. Our knights feared that the Crown would capture the position before long.

For the first time since I had arrived at Montségur, having fled Narbonne with my younger sister, it was feared that the church could seize the sacred treasure currently housed in the fortress and so plans to shift it to safer keeping had to be made.

In normal circumstances, such conspiracies are hardly a woman’s business, but as my sister and I, by virtue of our bloodline, were charged with delivering the ancient treasure to Montségur prior to the fall of Narbonne, it again has fallen to us to decide where best our family legacy can be delivered for preservation and security.

As a scholar, scribe and a daughter of the blood, it is my duty to keep a record of the plight of my family and our holy legacy, so that in future ages the truth might be known. Our days would seem numbered and yet I intend

to record our plight until I draw final breath and leave the barbarity of the world of the dark lord, Rex Mundi, behind to find my eternal repose in the higher kingdoms of the god of love.

JANUARY 10TH 1244

On the first of January, a courier from Saint-Paul-Cap-de-Joux arrived bearing letters from our brethren in Cremona. With the aid of an ancient map, this courier, Jean Ray, managed to bypass our besiegers, who were growing more and more discouraged by their lack of progress. The fact that this man negotiated a safe passage through our mountain gave we *Perfecti* of Montségur hope that our secret treasure might be dispatched from this fortress in safety—but to what destination?

A meeting of our church and political leaders was held that evening and Bishop Bertrand Marty suggested that we test the route we were to take out of the fortress, and to that end, two warriors were assigned to follow Jean Ray as he retraced his steps back down the mountain with what remained of Montségur's treasury. We would send the party to the chateau of Blancheford, near Rennes-Le-Château. There, the descendants of the late Bertrand de Blanchefort, the fourth Grand Master of the Temple knights, still maintained contact with the inner order of the knights known as the 'Chevaliers de l'Ordre de Notre Dame de Sion', the 'Prieurè de Sion', or just 'P.S.'. If our warriors got through, they could also ask for assistance for Montségur.

The priestesses of the Holy Mother have had a secret connection with the knightly order since 1127, the year that a part of the sacred treasure that I am bound to protect was entrusted to my order. The Grand Master of the Order of Sion at the time, who carried the title of the Defender of the Sacred Sepulchre, was Hugues de Payens. He headed a party of Temple knights who journeyed from Jerusalem to the Champagne Court at Troyes carrying many spoils from the first crusade. St Bernard, who was supervising the safe passage of the holy treasures through France, advised Hugues de Payens that two items amongst the holy bounty were best left with my sisters for safekeeping.

It had been the Order de Sion which had forewarned my order of the pending attack on Narbonne, requesting that the items guarded by my order

be moved to Montségur. I hoped that the Grand Master of the order could now suggest a secure destination for these items.

On the third of January our bishop's plan was executed. Under the cover of darkness, two warriors and the courier would climb down the sheer western face of the mountain, and into a secret passage carrying the bulk of the city's material wealth and a communiqué to the Grand Master of the P.S.

As we have had no word of the party's capture, all we can do now is wait and hope for aid before it is too late.

Last night, Gascon mountain troops scaled the northeastern tip of the *pog* and finally succeeded in taking the *Roc de la Tour*. It will not be long before their catapults are in range of our fortress walls and then all will be lost.

FEBRUARY 25TH 1244

For the past two months there has been little to report but our slow defeat, destruction and death. Our enemies have effectively fought their way toward the fortress and now the Catholic catapults are close enough to launch their huge stone missiles into the inhabited terraces of Montségur with fatal accuracy. The bodies of the dead are piling up and without excess wood to burn them, disease will surely be next.

Our warriors have launched several counterattacks in the hope of dislodging the enemy, but since their capture of the *Roc de la Tour* many reinforcements have arrived.

All hope of surviving this siege has now dissipated, and yet, so long as our sacred treasure remains concealed within Montségur, surrender is not an option. We have been forced to consider evacuating our treasure without any directive from the P.S., for if we do not our worst fears will be realised.

MARCH 2ND 1244

Praise be to the Great Mother. Two nights ago our prayers for an end to this conflict, one way or another, were finally answered. In the past week we have lost several of our finest sergeants to stone missiles, so this godsend comes not a day too soon.

Our courier has finally returned with a knight of the order to which we appealed for help. The knight, surprisingly, is not a Frank, as are many of the Sion Order. He is a recruit from the Scottish faction, in the service of Marie de Saint-Clair, who inherited the position of Grand Master of the Sion Knights from her late husband Jean de Gisors upon his death in 1220.

This Grand Master has surprised me with the extent of her knowledge about my order and the treasures in our possession, and she has sent with her knight a very detailed plan as to how we should proceed to escape with these sacred items from Montségur. I shall detail these orders as they come to pass, save unwelcome eyes should chance upon my work before our plan can be executed.

Yesterday, in accordance with Marie de Saint-Clair's suggestion, our lord, Pierre-Roger Mirepoix, left the fortress to negotiate terms of surrender. Our enemy offered what, on the surface, appeared to be very generous terms. Our men-at-arms would receive a full pardon and could depart the fortress with all of their wealth and weapons. Our citizens, including we *Perfecti*, would be freed, provided we denounced our heretical beliefs. In other words, we must convert to the Church of Rome and in so doing must disclose our knowledge, and the whereabouts of those most sacred items which thousands of the faithful have martyred themselves to protect. A fifteen-day truce was granted so that we could consider the terms, at the end of which time Montségur would be handed over to our invaders. In return for these *generous* terms, our lord agreed to hand over hostages to the Franks. If any among us tried to escape, the hostages would be killed.

These hostages were volunteers from our men-at-arms, who knew next to nothing about the sacred cause for which they fought, or of the secret plan behind our surrender.

As I watched the twenty knights march from the fortress, I prayed that I might do my job well. These imperfect men, sinners and killers all, were not yet ready to meet their maker, and I did not wish to feel responsible if they were slain before they could choose redemption through the rite of *consolamentum*.

Warriors almost always choose to take this sacred rite on their deathbed, because being infused with a spark of the divine and carrying that sacred gift within one's physical body for the remainder of one's life is an impossible burden for a fighting man. A *Perfecti* dedicates the self to

honouring the Holy Spirit within and forsakes the consumption of animal flesh, swearing, sexual intercourse for personal gratification and must never abuse another living soul. We guard with our lives the higher mysteries that are disclosed to us and a *Perfecti* would never forsake the truth in fear of burning, drowning or any other kind of death. Although staunch believers in our faith, many of our warriors fear falling short of these vows before their warring days are done. And yet, as the rite of *consolamentum* must be undertaken consciously, it is at great risk to their souls that our fighting men postpone their salvation. So, in the event that these men should, during their defence of the cause, be left conscious but dying and deprived of speech, they have already completed the ceremony of *convenenza*. *Convenenza* declares that the aspirant has granted permission for one of the *Perfecti* to speak on his behalf during the rite of *consolamentum* and so ensure his soul is saved before death.

If Christ is with us then all twenty of these knights will survive long enough to be rewarded with their salvation.

MARCH 14TH 1244—SPRING EQUINOX

Tomorrow the truce expires.

How can I describe the anguish of witnessing my closest friends and respected colleagues come to terms with their impending death? Not a one of the one hundred and eighty *Perfecti* surviving at Montségur is prepared to accept the terms we have been offered. Just as the thousands of believers who have died before us chose martyrdom over a lie, so shall all those here. Except my sister and myself. Sadly, we have been assigned another fate, and although I know our mission is a vital one, it does not ease the guilt and envy that I feel in my soul.

Guilt—that I must lie whilst my brethren die bravely for the cause. Envy—because tomorrow my fellow *Perfecti* shall finally achieve salvation. Their souls will be freed by the flame from this evil prison of flesh and blood, in which I must remain and continue to suffer.

Tonight will mark the last supper of the true faith at Montségur, and just as Jesus shared the Bread of Life with his apostles to strengthen their steadfastness during the torments to come, so shall all the faithful among us be rewarded. I have full permission from the Grand Master of Sion to allow

our bishop to aid our people in this way. Then, any among us who choose death on the morrow, including the men-at-arms, shall be given the choice to be set apart as one of the *Perfecti*, by being granted the rite of *consolamentum*.

MARCH 15TH 1244

The truce has expired.

Early this morning our lord descended to the camp of the enemy to assure Hugues de Archis that the fortress would be handed over as promised. When asked if all the besieged were prepared to accept the terms of surrender, our lord informed him that over half the remaining occupants were not prepared to relinquish their faith.

‘Then, in accordance with the law of the Holy Inquisition, they will burn on the morrow at dawn,’ Pierre Amiel, Archbishop of Narbonne, decreed.

I have never met the church representative who was installed in the town of my birth after my timely exodus. I know this man to be responsible for the deaths of those I grew up with and feel sure that there could not be a more wretched embodiment of Rex Mundi alive in this world.

Since the truce, the archbishop has kept his crusader knights busy building a large wooden holding yard and filling it with firewood—to burn any of the *Perfecti* that hold firm to their faith.

The Lord of Montségur could not believe that, following the rite held last night by our bishop which all believers had been invited to attend, over twenty of his men-at-arms had chosen to receive the rite of *consolamentum*, condemning themselves to death on the morrow.

Pierre-Roger Mirepoix had not attended the rite. He had no intention of dying, and hence had precious need of absolution. In his mind, he had done nothing but try to fulfil his duty to the citizens of Montségur. He chose instead to keep watch on the fortress wall, along with several other knights.

This morning Lord Mirepoix inquired of his faithful mercenary knights, Guillaume de Lahille and Bernard de Saint-Martin, why they had converted when in two days time they could have left Montségur free men and pardoned of their crimes against the church? The knights, who had led the massacre of the inquisitors of Avignonet, replied that when they had

received the Bread of Life they had glimpsed the true kingdom of god and thus had lost all desire for this world. They now realised the error of their ways and having been absolved of their sins against god, they wished to depart this world as one of the 'pure ones' before conflict could again tarnish their souls.

Of course their motives came as no surprise to any of we *Perfecti*, for such is the effect of manna upon the soul, even in the smallest of quantities.

LESSON 17

SURRENDER

MARCH 16TH 1244

This will be my last account of my time at Montségur, and it is with a heavy heart and conscience that I put pen to parchment.

This morning over two hundred *Perfecti* marched down from the fortress and into the large wood-filled stockade at the southern foot of the mountain, where they were burned *en masse*. Some were cast into the flames by their captors, but most flung themselves into the huge pyre, more than willing to depart this world.

The remainder of the garrison was confined to the fortress and were compelled to look on—my sister, Lilutu, and myself were hidden among them, disguised as warrior knights. We do not fear death, any more than our brethren, but our destiny is to follow a different path of suffering.

The winds carried the horrendous death cries of my brethren to my ears and then swept them away just as efficiently. And although their suffering will haunt my consciousness the rest of my days, I did not feel compelled to weep, for I knew their joy and envied them their spiritual liberation. The sound of restrained weeping then caught my attention and the source was close by.

I was surprised and ashamed to look beside me and find tears rolling down Lilutu's face. 'Turn away if you must, and block your ears. But do not expose yourself. No warrior would weep,' I whispered to her.

My sister turned from the fires and sank to her haunches, breathing deep in an attempt to stop her flow of tears. 'How can you be so cold? These are our friends, our family.'

'Would you have their sacrifice be in vain?' I snapped. She knew as well as I what was at stake. 'All is lost if you cannot refrain from expressing your selfish sentiment.'

The Franks had assured our men-at-arms that they would be free to leave Montségur on the morrow, but there was no guarantee that we would be left alone until that time, for our enemies had made idle promises before. Lilutu and I may have been able to pass as warriors at a distance, as we were both quite tall for our gender, but at close range our chain mail and warrior tunics wouldn't, in all likelihood, prevent our discovery.

Fortunately, we would not be marching out of Montségur with the other men-at-arms tomorrow. Our departure would take place tonight, despite the risk to the remaining garrison and the hostages still being held by Hugues de Archis. Even if the Franks kept their word and permitted our warriors to depart with their wealth and weapons, they would be searched for the legendary treasure that had spawned the forty-year crusade against our people.

To do honour to the tens of thousands who had already given their lives for the cause, all survivors at Montségur were prepared to make the same sacrifice to ensure the escape of my party this night. At all costs the secret we harbour must not fall into the hands of the papacy.

MARCH 17TH 1244

After two days of solid travel we have reached the chateau of Blancheford, the ancestral home of the fourth Grand Master of the Temple knights, Bertrand de Blanchefort, whose descendants still provide a safe haven for all of our faith.

As I am alive to pen this account, I need not dwell on the success of our escape from Montségur, except to mention that one of the two Credenti warriors assigned to protect my sister and I perished during our treacherous descent of the sheer western face of the mountain. For it seemed that Pierre-Roger Mirepoix did not trust the guide appointed to us by the Order of Sion as well as our *Perfecti* leaders had done—for the knight did not subscribe to our faith. To add to our suspicions, the only member of our party to have witnessed the death of our Credenti protector was the Sion knight who went by the name of Albray Devere. According to his account, our colleague had lost his footing and in his panic to right the situation he'd wriggled so much that he'd worn the rope to shreds; Sir Devere suspected the rope had begun to fray as the three of us had each descended. Our Sion guide had then

employed a spare rope to lower himself to the ledge and passage where we awaited him. The passage led into myriad secret tunnels through the mountain.

To add to the shadow cast over our guide, at the exit from the mountain our party was surprised by a band of Sion knights, who claimed that they were the true representatives sent by Marie de Saint-Clair and that Sir Devere was an impostor.

As their leader, Sir Christian Molier, is a Frenchman, it seemed more likely that he is of the Order de Sion, and after having our Credenti colleague perish at the hands of Sir Devere, our remaining Credenti guardian was more inclined to believe Molier's claim.

Sir Devere was seized and disarmed by Molier's men, two of whom were instructed to escort him back to Sion headquarters in Orleans immediately.

The Scottish knight protested strongly to his removal from duty and swore blind that it was Molier who was lying, despite being beaten for his accusations. Devere was then bound, and dragged from our midst on foot behind the horses of his captors.

Molier has swiftly delivered us to our first destination and hence I can only assume that our decision to trust him is a sound one. Our Credenti guardian, Pierre de Saint-Martin, and I both feel quite confident in entrusting Molier and his men to arrange the second leg of our journey.

Part of the treasure we have removed from Montségur is a document of vital historical import. It has been in the possession of our holy order since the Visigoths sacked Rome in 410AD. It is hoped that in future times this sacred relic will authenticate the validity of my bloodline. As this document shall be no safer where I am bound than it would be in the hands of the papacy, it must remain here with my sister Lilutu who, with the aid of our Blancheford allies, will see to a suitable place of concealment. However, the treasure that has been entrusted to me does not belong in this world. And as I know of only one remaining passage that leads to the realm of its origin, I must make the perilous journey to Outremer—the land beyond the sun—otherwise known as the Kingdom of Jerusalem.

A late note: I have just been informed that the two knights who were assigned to escort Sir Devere to Orleans have been killed. One of the

knights perished at the time of Devere's escape and the other has died from his wounds upon arrival at Chateau Blancheford with this news.

As the impostor is again at large I have been warned to be on my guard, in case he attempts to acquire my sacred charge. Molier has posted guards outside the door of my quarters and I feel confident enough of my safety. The god of light and spirit is surely guiding my quest to a speedy conclusion.

There is no community left that can be entrusted to harbour and not misuse this great gift from heaven. Hence, the creator must be most eager to have his sacred treasure back in His fold where it shall be safe from mankind once more.

MARCH 25TH 1244

For a week now I have been a prisoner and have been forced to move at such a relentless pace that I have not had a moment to put pen to parchment.

The same night when last I wrote, my Credenti guardian, Pierre de Saint-Martin, was murdered as he slept and so would I have been, had I not vowed I would cooperate with my abductor.

The traitor Devere managed to gain access to my quarters at Chateau Blancheford via a window and bolted my room shut from the inside. Sword to my throat, he requested I accompany him or hand over my treasure into his safekeeping.

If not for the threat to my life, and my quest, it would have been difficult not to scoff at his demand. Still, I insisted upon knowing for whom the knight was working before I would consider either of his requests.

He replied that he had already told me that he was in the service of Marie de Saint-Clair, and applying more pressure to the sword tip at my throat he stressed that he would not allow my burden to be stolen due to the bad judgement of a naive girl. I was not given the opportunity to protest to his insult as he advised that he intended to see the treasure to its resting place, alone if he must.

Sir Devere had no need to lie to me with the situation as it was, and for a moment his conviction to the cause swayed my better judgement. I

warned him that any man would perish on this quest without a daughter of the blood as a guide.

A loud pounding on my door prevented me from confiding in him further, praise god.

It was Molier who yelled through the thick wooden door to warn me that Pierre de Saint-Martin had been slain and he ordered that I unbolt my door at once for my own safety.

What little favour Devere had gained was abruptly dispersed, and I accused him of murdering yet another of my guardians.

Devere simply pointed out that his sword was clean. Then, wrapping my long dark braid around one hand, Devere dragged me from my bed and tossed my warrior disguise at me. ‘No time for a judicial inquiry now, princess,’ he hissed.

His lack of respect for my station infuriated me—no knight of the high orders would treat a priestess of the blood in such a manner, whether he subscribed to the faith or not. This seemed to confirm Devere’s falsehood in my mind and I glanced to the solid timber door that was being rammed, hoping the guards would break through.

‘You are not the only daughter of the blood left on Earth,’ Devere commented, as he spotted the two chains around my neck disappearing under my long undershirt.

He was implying that my sister would serve his purpose just as well as I, and she would prove a far less troublesome hostage. My sister was needed at the chateau and I was hardly going to expose her to further danger; she did not have the constitution for such an adventure. Too many people had died to aid my quest for me to be parted from my burden so easily.

I dressed quickly, but before we descended the rope to the courtyard that would soon be swarming with guards, Devere stole one of the chains from around my neck. It was the chain of gold that hosted the Star—the Highward Fire-Stone.

‘Stay close or lose it,’ he warned.

It puzzled me then, as it does now, why Devere didn’t take both sacred vials? Why bother extending me such a show of faith? And yet, if Devere had indeed been a knight of the high orders of Sion, he may well know that the Fire vial I carry is of little use to me or anyone else who is not a male of

my bloodline, for it is meant for their consumption alone. Only the contents of the Star vial heightened my awareness and the supernatural talents inherent in me. Those of my order only partook of the Highward Fire-Stone during sacred rites or holy feast days and even then, it was in the smallest of quantities so that its influence was of a temporary duration. Too much psychic talent had been known to drive women of my order insane with visions of the dark times ahead and the evil thoughts and intent of the non-Perfecti. In this instance, however, I feel the creator would have forgiven me for using the sacred substance to divine the truth about my abductor.

As it is, I am in a complete quandary with regard to his true loyalties, for he has made it quite clear that he does not subscribe to the beliefs of my faith. And when I asked him why the Grand Master of Sion had chosen him for this mission, Devere claimed he was the only knight of his order who had previously visited our final destination. This seemed a satisfactory reason and yet I sensed there was something he wasn't telling me. I fear that only when we reach the Sinai will I be enlightened to his true character and intent.

In a few days we will reach Marseilles, and board a vessel bound for Outremer. Once our sea voyage has commenced it will prove nearly impossible for Molier's rescue party to find us. I can only pray that he will hunt us down before then. For, despite his tolerance so far, I do not trust Devere. The way he observes me at times is most unnerving. I can almost hear the selfish voice of Rex Mundi at work upon his mind and heart.

MARCH 28TH 1244

I found my abductor's choice of transport for our sea voyage curious. Although the Templar Knights have many vessels that sail between their coastal strongholds on this side of the Mediterranean coast, Devere opted to purchase passage on an Armenian trade ship headed home to Cilicia, via Antioch. The ship and captain may have been Cilician, but the crew was a mix of Armenians, Christian Palestinians and Arabs—there were even a couple of Turks. Despite the cultural diversity of the crew they conversed mainly in Arabic, except for when they were socialising within their own ethnic group.

I suspected Devere's choice of transport had something to do with the rift that had caused the formal separation between the Order of Sion and the knights of the Temple at Gisors in 1188. Since then the Templars' parent order has slipped quietly into obscurity, whilst the Templars, free to pursue their own objectives, have dramatically increased their fame, wealth and power. It is my guess that the separation was all show, for the knights of the Temple are fast becoming more influential than any one king, emperor, or even the Church of Rome. I fear the papacy will not tolerate such undermining of their authority, and once they have finished with the persecution of my people, they will be looking for new wealth and knowledge to covet. One thing I do know for certain is that the two orders of knights no longer share the same Grand Master and have not done so since the time Bertrand de Blancheford held the high position.

Watching Devere converse with the captain and crew of our vessel, it is clear that he feels far more at ease with these men of the East than he did with the men-at-arms at Montségur. It is also apparent that his colouring—dark hair, eyes and skin—is similar to these men. He certainly has no problem conversing in the foreign dialect. In fact, Arabic seems to roll off his tongue more readily than D'oc or English; for a Scot his accent had, from the start, seemed rather lacking in colour.

I, too, had dark colouring, for it is said that the blood of Judah still runs strong in the females of my line. One day, should I survive this quest, I shall be called upon to mate with a male of the blood and produce an heir to carry on the holy traditions and keep the sacred knowledge until such time as mankind is ready for an awakening. Three-quarters of a century ago, St Bernard had hoped that this time was nigh, but the past forty years of terror and torture have extinguished all hope in that regard.

Gone, too, is any hope of Molier's rescue party finding me, now that we are at sea. I have spent every free waking hour praying that I shall still succeed in my quest before I am delivered from this loathsome existence—this is my only wish for this life.

MARCH 30TH 1244

My earthly vessel has been so wretchedly ill these past few days that, even now, to write this account is a great effort. Yet I am compelled to attempt to

purge myself of these undesirable feelings in the hope of soothing my agitated spirit. For I cannot honestly say whether it is the sea voyage, or my companions, that sickens me more.

I still wear the apparel of a knight and the crew of this ship has conveniently resolved to treat me as a man, despite knowing full well that I am not. Devere has made an arrangement with the captain for me to use his quarters to relieve and refresh myself. Nonetheless, this seems to be the only allowance made for me.

I am not as fluent in Arabic as my abductor, yet I do comprehend enough of the language to understand a lot of the banter of the men whose company I am forced to keep day and night. They converse openly about their most base and perverted desires in regard to those of my sex, and it is obvious that there is not an honourable or pure soul amongst them. Some have even asked for my thoughts on their foul subject matter and they find it most amusing that I want to ignore their questions and refrain from comment.

As there is no escape for me from such circumstances and, clearly, I am surrounded by infidels despite their claim to be Christians, I asked Devere yesterday if he would please consider returning that which he stole. My request, as with everything else I have said in the last few days, was received with great amusement.

‘And grant you the power to manipulate us all? I don’t think so.’

Devere’s protest made me furious. Either he was a Sion knight and thus bound to oblige me, or he was the scoundrel I took him for, and I stated as much in no uncertain terms.

My abductor claimed that he had taken no oath binding him to my service. ‘It is my ancestry that granted me a place in my order and which binds me to this quest,’ he explained.

This response puzzled me, until he clarified his statement.

‘Although we must be distantly related, it will not prevent me from killing you, should you threaten to thwart my mission.’

Devere was implying he was of the royal line of Judah! I had never met a male of the blood before and my first reaction was to reject his claim—he was just trying to throw me off guard, and perhaps he was succeeding. He was standing over me, using our private business as an excuse to stand at uncomfortably close quarters to me.

‘Don’t think I have not considered that it might be easier for me to seek another daughter of the blood to aid me with this task, upon reaching Outremer.’ Devere’s voice was uncomfortably intimate and menacing.

‘You speak as if we were in plentiful supply and discernible at a glance.’ I could see through his game and would not be played for the fool.

‘It is not with my eyes that I can scry out such a woman, but with my heart,’ he said, in a tone that some might consider seductive.

Then, to my great horror, Devere stripped off his chain mail and exposed his bare chest to me. I was shocked to witness indisputable proof of his claim, for on the smooth skin of his torso he bore the same birthmark as I did, a red cross, and in the same place—just to the right of his heart.

‘I am only ever attracted to women of the blood.’

His conclusion made me gasp. Devere may have just confessed lust—for me, a holy virgin priestess. Such a confession was unforgivable and certainly not indicative of a knight of the higher orders and their vows of chastity. Marie de Saint-Clair would never have sent such a knight to protect me. ‘You could never be who you claim to be,’ I stated, and immediately departed his company to pray for his soul...and for my safety during this mission, which was now severely in doubt.

‘My apologies.’ Devere followed in pursuit to torment me further. ‘I forgot you *Perfecti* consider earthly love to be nothing more than prostitution, even when it is sanctified by marriage.’

‘You forget nothing,’ I accused. ‘You deliberately attempt to offend me and destroy my peace of mind.’

He smiled, again amused by my disapproving reaction. ‘Your thoughts regarding me must already have been on shaky ground, if I can rattle you so easily. Still, now you see why I left the Fire vial in your possession...to avoid the temptation of the power it would give me.’

I was doubly shocked and confused. How could I possibly believe he had any admirable intentions after the confession he had just made? ‘You seem to think very highly of yourself, Sir Devere, but I can assure you that I do not share your delusions. No mortal man could ever rival my love of the one true god.’ I hurried below decks to avoid any further debate and to escape the despicable laughter of the crew, who no doubt ascribed all sorts of disgusting motives to my hasty retreat.

Ever since Devere revealed his birthright to me I have been ailing, for I literally cannot stomach our association when I suspect that he is entertaining impure thoughts about our relationship. The constant rocking of this vessel, caused by rough seas, only accentuates my revulsion.

Why could I not have escaped this world with my fellow *Perfecti* in the burning fields of Montségur? I had never thought to have my faith so sorely tested and in such a seductive fashion, nor had I ever imagined that I could find such a test so deeply disturbing. How could I have known that the face of Rex Mundi might haunt one so, his smile and manner so charming while also tormenting. I could accept any other man as being a vessel for the supreme corrupter of the world and the human spirit, but not a son of the blood.

Already I feel his words twisting my thoughts to his own ends and setting me at odds with everything I hold to be true and good. It was disturbing that Devere had made it sound as if an attraction between us was inevitable. The seductive expression on his face as he wove his spell only adds to its potency as the confrontation plays upon my memory.

I have known since birth that the god of good and the god of evil are equally as strong as one another, and that only human determination will confer power to either of them. Unfair as it is that my first personal confrontation with Rex Mundi should be when I am trapped in his company for weeks on end, yet I shall not falter from my vows. As is my duty, I will endeavour instead to dispel the corrupt thoughts from my cousin, so that he might better serve the higher cause.

APRIL 29TH 1244

For the past month there has been little to report. Our voyage has taken us via Sicily and Crete, but I cannot comment on these exotic places because, whilst our ship was in port, I was bound and kept below decks, and forbidden to even think about putting a foot onshore. Needless to say this only added to my animosity toward my abductor.

I have spent most of my time in prayer and silent contemplation and up until yesterday my troubled spirit was feeling far more at peace. Devere has not talked to me on a personal level and, although I sense his attraction in every glance, I am thankful for his distance and I have prayed for his soul.

However, yesterday I saw a side to Devere that has thrown me into confusion once more, and I can no longer think poorly of him or of the crew of this vessel. Yesterday, my abductors became my saviours, and although I know Devere is bound to protect me, I feel I now owe him a debt that I cannot imagine I will ever be able to repay.

Despite the trials and horrors I have witnessed in my thirty years of life, I have never been so terrified for my wellbeing as when a Saracen pirate ship was spotted trailing our vessel when we passed by the islands of Rhodes.

These islands have long been known as a haven for bandits who seek to plunder passing ships, seize their crew and passengers and sell them into slavery.

Our captain knew it was impossible to try and outrun the pirate vessel. His ship was weighted down with a cargo of timber, iron, furs, honey, wax, and wine from Europe for the crusading knights in the Holy Land. He was also carrying ivory and gold, acquired from East Africa long before Devere and I had purchased passage. This cargo was prized by pirates and our only means of escape would be to fight off our attackers, which the captain assured me he and his crew had done many times before.

I was hidden below deck in a crate in the cargo hold. Before nailing down the lid, Devere assured me that he was the finest knight in all of Christendom. At the time I thought he was exaggerating to ease my worry and this must have reflected on my face. 'How do you think I escaped Molier's men?' This gave me food for thought. His claim did seem to support his boast. 'I shall come and get you out as soon as our adversaries retreat.'

My crate had small slits down the side, through which I could see and draw air. As I lay there in near darkness, waiting for the sound of a skirmish to erupt up on deck, all sorts of dreadful scenarios ran through my mind. What if the ship was taken and the crew killed or enslaved, and our vessel was diverted to some distant port? I might starve to death before I was ever discovered. Worse still, what if I was discovered? I had a fair idea of the physical abuse and horrors that lay in store for me if I fell into the hands of a shipload of pirates. I was not even carrying a weapon with which to end my own life if such a scenario was to unfold. For the first time since we'd

met, my heart, will and soul were with Devere—I had never prayed so hard for the life of any man in my entire existence.

The sound of men yelling and the clash of swords set the blood pounding in my throat; soon I could barely hear what transpired on deck over the sound of my terrified heartbeat. I had expected that I would end my days tied to a stake by my enemies, and I had prepared myself for such spiritual persecution—I did not fear the torture devices of the Inquisition, or a death by fire—but sexual abuse was quite another matter. Such a violation is too intimate and personal to bear so easily, and the duration of suffering could prove far longer than that which the Inquisition were prepared to set aside to break a soul.

The hatch to the cargo hold opened and daylight streamed down. Two men lowered themselves onto the highest stack of crates; my heart sank when I realised that they were not members of our crew. ‘She’s loaded all right!’ one yelled up to those on deck and then he jumped down to floor level. Using the tools he wore on his belt, the intruder cracked the lids of a few crates to uncover the contents. He called out his discoveries to his associate, who passed the information to those on deck. The pirate was now only a crate or so away from me, and I was horrified when his attention skipped to my hiding place. He unexpectedly rocked my container, sending me crashing into the far side of it where a nail punctured my skin and, although I tried to smother my reaction, a gasp slipped from my lips.

‘What have we here then?’ he muttered enthusiastically as he cracked the wooden lid and peered in at me. The pirate chuckled and tipped the crate, sending me hurtling onto the floor at his feet. ‘Livestock,’ he advised his accomplice, who gave a cry of approval and jumped down into the hold to assist his crewmate in seizing their acquisition. ‘I don’t believe there is a man beneath that warrior guise,’ the discovering pirate commented as he hauled me to my feet and handed me to his shipmate. ‘Shall we check?’ He grabbed for my trousers and I screamed to give myself strength as I kicked him away from me. The pirate did not appreciate the numbing kick in the jaw my boots dealt him, and he drew his large curved sword. ‘I would be more cooperative if I were you,’ he advised.

‘Death would come as a welcome relief from your company,’ I spat back at him.

‘I wouldn’t dream of killing you, princess. You’ll fetch a high price where we are headed, and provide much entertainment for our crewmates before then. So, perhaps we’ll just maim you a little.’ He raised his sword high and metal suddenly protruded through his round gut, spraying me with blood as he fell dead at my feet.

Devere withdrew his sword and looked to the pirate now holding me captive. ‘Your friends are all leaving...you’d best be quick if you want to join them.’

The pirate didn’t know whether or not to believe Devere’s claim, but he was forced to let go of me in order to draw his sword and I dived for cover as soon as I felt his grip loosen.

I watched the sword fight that ensued, amazed and impressed by Devere’s prowess. He had no sooner finished off his opponent than two more thieves jumped into the hold, and although he fought gallantly, one of the pirates landed my protector a mighty gash to his right side. I feared the battle was lost, but Devere fought on as though I had just imagined the fatal blow. The man who had wounded Devere was finally defeated. A call of retreat sounded out from the pirates above, capturing the attention of the second attacker who made for the hatch. As the intruder jumped up and gripped the entrance to the hold to pull himself up, Devere went after him, but collapsed before he could prevent the pirate from escaping.

And so it is that I have been keeping a constant vigil at Devere’s bedside. I have been bathing his wound and dressing it to prevent infection, but his blood loss has been great and he is pale and weak. If he would only stir from his delirium long enough to partake of some food and wine, I could be more assured of his recovery, but as it is I fear the loss of my guide. As much as I have complained about Devere and been suspicious of his motives, what shall I do without him once I reach Outremer? I have no contacts there and although I am aware of where I need to go, without having travelled to my destination before I could be led to China and be none the wiser.

And so I pray and tend and hope to god that the creator will see fit to return my saviour to good health.

APRIL 30TH 1244

The answer to saving Sir Devere was right in front of me all along—I must have been severely shaken by the pirate attack not to have thought of it sooner. It was only when I considered taking the Star vial that hung around Devere's neck that I realised the smallest quantity of the Food of Life would restore my guide to perfect health.

I placed a small amount on his tongue, and within moments his colour and vitality had returned. When he came around, the knight seemed both pleased and surprised that I had not let him perish, nor retrieved my property from him.

'There seemed little point, when you would just take it back again,' I explained, but in truth, Devere and I felt like a team now and I do believe that I trusted him more than any man. 'And how shall I ever reach my destination without your aid?' I pointed out.

'So your actions were purely professional?' he teased me, as he attempted to sit upright, yet the man felt so lightheaded from lack of food that he decided to stay put for the time being.

'Of course,' I assured him with a smile.

'I don't think I've ever seen you smile,' he commented, 'it suits you very well.'

I suppressed my delight at his recovery, in case he got the wrong impression, and avoided his amorous mood by checking his wound.

I was startled to find that it had healed completely, without so much as a scar. I, more than anyone, was aware of the great healing power of the Highward Fire-Stone, but I had never used it for such a purpose before.

'Is it bad?' Devere queried, upon seeing my dumbfounded expression. He raised himself to view his wound and was as astounded as I was. 'How long have I been convalescing?'

I swallowed hard and then confessed that he had only been ailing a day.

'A day!' He was puzzled but a moment, before he realised the truth. 'You wasted the Food of Life on me?' Devere asked, lowering his voice.

'You would have died otherwise.' I defended my course of action and stepped away from him as my emotions unexpectedly overpowered me.

The look on his face was most disturbing; it was as if he could see straight through me and into my heart. 'My Lady du Lac, you are not as cold as—'

His eyes suddenly glazed over and my patient fell back into a horizontal position once more.

‘Devere?’ I approached and knelt beside him, confused as to what was happening.

‘Shhh!’ he urged me, his eyes fixed straight ahead.

At this moment I recognised his behaviour; this was the same reaction that the priestess of my order had when she consumed the Food of Life. I had not thought that the sacred nature of his bloodline might enhance the reaction of the cure I had administered.

He then closed his eyes, disappearing into a euphoric state, and did not move or say a word for several hours.

During this time I arranged for some food to be brought to the captain’s cabin where Devere was recovering, and I passed my time penning an account of recent events.

‘Are you writing about me?’

Devere startled me from my work and I looked aside to find him coherent. ‘Perhaps.’

‘I’ll wager that your account is far more favourable than those you have penned about me over the past few months.’

I ignored his accusation and fetched the tray of food. ‘How are you feeling now?’ I inquired, placing the tray at his bedside.

‘Better than I have in my whole life,’ he said in delight, sliding into an upright position so that he might lean against the carved wooden bedhead to support himself. ‘Or at least I will once I have eaten something substantial.’

I allowed my patient to tuck into his meal and I went back to penning my account. However, my mind was distracted as I was dying to know what Devere had divined over the past few hours.

‘You could just ask me what you wish to know, although I’m not sure that you will like the response,’ he commented, as he finished up the meal and wiped his mouth on his sleeve.

His words were somewhat shocking. Could he read my mind now? I had found that I possessed this ability temporarily after partaking of the Highward Fire-Stone at sacred rites. ‘What have you foreseen?’ I ventured to ask despite his warning, which had only heightened my curiosity.

‘I believe there might be another reason why you and I have been thrown together for this quest,’ he began openly, and then seemed

undecided about how to proceed. 'You feel this reason at a soul level, but because of your beliefs you choose to ignore it.'

I stood, shocked and offended by his implication. 'Don't be vile.'

'See, you do feel it.' He casually drove home his point, and I felt compelled to leave his presence and not be drawn into his seductive argument.

'I thought that we had grown beyond this subject matter.' I collected my writing materials and made for the cabin door. 'It is very disappointing to be proven wrong.'

'Oh, don't worry,' Devere added, a little spitefully. 'Our love shall never be realised. Not so much as a single kiss shall you ever give me. I know that to submit would destroy everything you have worked your whole life to achieve and I will take steps to curtail my feelings and bring them in check. However...you will be the death of me.'

The claim brought me to a halt, and I did an about-face to assess how serious he was.

'That inevitability has been made heartbreakingly plain, I'm afraid.'

The emotions that fired up my being made me want to cry, but why? Was it the sheer abandon I heard in his tone, which seemed to indicate he had nothing left to live for and thus death scared him not? Was it because my heart was in sympathy with his claims, and I dared not admit it, even to myself? Was it that I feared Rex Mundi was just playing games with my conscience and I was falling into his trap? 'If you feel anything at all for me, you shall never speak of such things to me ever again,' I said. I didn't want to have to hate Devere, for I did not. But I could not consider his feelings about me either.

'I would not have spoken of them now, but you asked,' he replied.

This conversation was just exhausting, for indeed I had. But could I trust him never to broach the subject again?

'I shall be as a brother to you from now on,' he assured me before I even had the chance to try and phrase my question.

'Very good.' I took a deep breath to calm myself. 'I shall hold you to your word.' I opened the door and stepped into the corridor that led to the galley and deck.

'Yes, you shall,' he uttered as I closed the door behind me and leant on it for strength. Why was every word he said a drain on me, even when there

was no sexual connotation attached?

Our association during this mission is never going to work, I fear, when it seems that even I cannot keep my focus and faith. Has god abandoned me, or is it that my heart has abandoned my god?

MAY 23RD 1244

My spirits are soaring. Off the port bow, as I write, the Principality of Antioch is within sight. I am excited beyond words that today I shall set foot on dry land.

Despite my previous fears, Devere has kept his vow to me, and has been more amiable, in a brotherly sense, than ever before. Our conversation on the night of his recovery could have been a dream, for he has never referred to it again. It is almost as if he has forgotten it entirely, for there has been nothing implied in his manner or words which would indicate that he is repressing feelings for me. Devere did say that he would take steps to bring his feelings under control, although how he managed this, or quite what he had meant by it, was a mystery to me. I was glad that whatever he was doing seemed to be working.

I began to believe that my knight's prediction of 'a relationship between us never being realised' was quite true, and so I felt far more at ease in Devere's company. I had become fond enough of my travelling companion to hope that his second prediction, that I would be the death of him, would not be proven true either. I have to admit that I wondered if one prediction related to the other. And if I bestowed the kiss he had said I would never give him, would that prove *all* his predictions false?

I should not be thinking such thoughts; perhaps the excitement of the day is getting to me.

MAY 28TH 1244

I have been a fool and I feel I am a disgrace to my order. Thankfully, my god brought me to my senses before I could shame myself and it is only now, days after the event, that I have found the courage to confess my folly.

On our first night in port, Devere found us very comfortable lodgings in an inn frequented by rich merchants visiting Antioch's seaport of St

Simeon. I cannot express how good it felt to bathe after months at sea, or how wonderful it felt to sleep in a room all by myself.

As I lay down in bed that night I could still feel the rocking of the boat. Devere had warned that this would be the case and that it would be several days before I would again feel comfortable on solid land. After some time I did manage to fall asleep, but my dreams were most disturbing.

I have never before dreamed of being intimate with a man and the vision was so vivid that I believed the event was truly taking place. I felt no guilt, doubt or inhibition in the act, only relief and elation beyond any earthly joy I had ever known. Before my expectations could be fully satisfied I awoke in a sweat, and was disappointed to find myself alone and more tormented than I had ever been. To add to my vexation I knew there was but a wall between myself and the man I desired so desperately. I wasn't myself, for there was no reasoning with the emotions that had been set into play by my dreaming. Nothing seemed to matter beyond making my vision a reality.

In the corridor beyond my quarters not a soul could be seen; thus, I did not bother covering my clean long-shirt. I just crept silently to Devere's quarters next door and quietly opened the door.

A very sobering sight met my eyes. Devere was as naked as the local woman beneath him in whom he was taking deep pleasure.

I probably would have been wise to slip out of there unannounced, but not only had Devere lied to me, he had betrayed the code of his order as well. 'How could you?' I accused, so furious that I ignored my better judgement.

Devere looked up at me, almost as if he had expected the intrusion. 'It was easy,' he said, not bothering to withdraw from his conquest to speak with me. 'I just closed my eyes and thought of you.'

That was the last straw. The coolness of his response made me so ashamed of my own intention that I felt ill and quickly returned to my quarters, where I was compelled to empty the contents of my stomach into my bedpan. I praised the Lord, for what I had borne witness to had brought me to my senses and had prevented me from betraying my holy vows. But my heart pained me with such an agony, as I had never felt before, that I wished I had a dagger in order to cut it from the body it had nearly betrayed.

I had not cried since I was a small child who knew no better than to desire the mundane pleasures of this world, and I despised Devere for my regression. I prayed to god to be merciful and deliver me from this man's company. My prayers and tears only subsided when exhaustion finally relieved me of consciousness.

The next morning there was a pounding on my door—I suspected it was Devere come to fetch me and I dreaded the thought of facing him. I could feel how swollen were my eyes and face, and I could not have been more ashamed and disappointed with myself.

'I am not dressed yet,' I snapped. 'Please come back later.' I splashed my face with water from the washbowl and fished for the cotton drying cloth.

'My Lady du Lac. It is I, Sir Christian Molier. Are you unharmed?'

My heart shot into my throat. I should have been relieved at this turn of events, and I was, and yet all I could think about was Devere. What would become of him if he was captured? Had they caught him?

'Yes, my lord.' I hurried to dress myself and answer the door.

'Is Devere in there with you?' he queried.

I unlatched the door and opened it. 'No, my lord. I believe Sir Devere had plans that necessitated the taking of his own quarters last night.'

'Then I must be doubly grateful to find you safe and unharmed.' The French knight bowed to me dutifully. 'The innkeeper has told us that Devere took the room next door, and yet he no longer seems to be there.' Molier suddenly hauled me into the corridor, and his men stormed in to search my quarters.

'Will you not accept my word?' I took offence at being startled and manhandled in this way.

'A thousand apologies, my lady.' Molier let me go and explained himself. 'I feared the rogue might be holding you hostage.'

Obviously, the search of my room failed to produce Devere and I breathed easier when Molier seemed to lose interest in pursuing him. 'Are you still in possession of your sacred charge?' he queried. Although I was inclined to, I thought better of telling Molier the truth for fear that it would give him an incentive to pursue Devere. The prophecy that I would be the death of Devere added force to my decision to lie. 'Yes, I still have it.'

When Molier had his answer he wasted no time in getting me to the ship he'd acquired for the purpose of sailing down the coast to St Jean d'Acre in the Kingdom of Jerusalem.

That is where I now find myself, on the final leg of my journey to Outremer. At St Jean d'Acre, Molier informs me, we shall find all we need to begin our inland journey into the Sinai.

I don't know what I shall do about the lie I told Molier on Devere's behalf, but even now I feel my betrayer is keeping pace with our party. Unfortunately, I believe I have not seen the last of Albray Devere, but if he chooses to pursue this quest his death will not be on my conscience.

It seems rather appropriate that this parchment on which I have been recording events since the fall of Montségur is now coming to an end. A new start is needed, one that complements my new perspective, which is this: never trust or feel for any man in this world more than the god whom I serve. My beliefs and oath shall never be threatened again...that I do vow.

LESSON 18

COERCION

It was five-thirty in the afternoon by the time I had finished reading Lillet's account and when I noted the hour, I made for the shower to freshen up before my dinner engagement with Molier.

It was plain to see why Albray had not wanted me to read the old document, for it did not exactly paint a sterling picture of his character. I must admit I was a little surprised at the way he had played the holy priestess for sport and I could not help but wonder if he was doing the same to me? Albray had warned that Molier was trying to undermine my regard for my knight and protector, and I hated to admit that a tiny seed of doubt had been planted. And yet, I had seen Albray and Lillet together in the astral realms. Whatever had transpired between them in life had certainly not affected their deep regard for each other in the afterlife. But perhaps in the afterlife all was automatically forgiven.

As I showered, I cursed my lack of spiritual knowledge and reminded myself that I was only getting half of the story as far as Lillet was concerned. Where was the scroll she had penned after this one? Had she had the opportunity to continue her account? I also cursed that I had still only read three-quarters of Ashlee's account by this stage, and I had yet to discover if Molier was indeed behind the kidnapping of Lady Susan Devere.

While I dried myself, I resolved to keep my dinner engagement short so that I might continue reading Ashlee's journal before I retired this evening. I was fast running out of time to unravel the truth behind the Star-Fire Temple locked in the mount beneath me. Tomorrow Andre would return with the white powder I suspected would unlock the ancient shrine. As I had yet to master my psychic skills fully, how could I expect to combat evil forces seeking to misuse the mysterious celestial powers that, according to legend, resided in the temple?

Once dressed, I summoned Albray, as I had promised I would prior to facing Molier. When he arrived, my knight observed me for a moment, appearing a little taken aback.

I've never seen you wear a dress before...you look beautiful. His compliment was given rather begrudgingly, and I could tell he was perturbed that the occasion was dinner with Molier.

Thank you. I ignored his jealous air. *I'm glad you like it.* I placed Albray's stone amongst the belongings in my bag for safekeeping, as I didn't want to risk carrying the charm into Molier's presence. Once Albray was summoned he could sense my need of him just as well without it. *I'll be off to dinner now and I don't plan to be late in returning.*

You seem distant, Albray noted. *You read Lillet's story?*

The scroll only recorded her movements to where she was sailing with Molier to St Jean d'Acre, I informed him as I retrieved the scroll from my table to return it to Molier. The information seemed to be a blow to Albray.

That explains your reserve this evening.

You're imagining it. I smiled to reassure him.

I wish I were.

His persistent argument was starting to get on my nerves. *You were wrong about Lillet, okay? She was in love with you.*

Don't tell me that! he protested.

I rolled my eyes. What did he want me to say? *It's the truth. I'm sure you had your reasons for toying with her emotions as you did—*

I toyed with HER emotions. That IS rich. It was she who toyed with my heart!

I held a hand up in truce. *I don't want to go into this right now . . . I'm going to be late for my business meeting.*

Fine! Albray vented his annoyance. *Go to Molier.*

I turned and headed for the tent flap.

But it will serve you no better than it did Lillet, or me.

Look! I glanced back at him as I exited. *Can I count on you this evening, or not?*

Of course. Saving damsels in distress is my lot, I'm afraid.

I had to leave before I said something I'd regret. *And they say women are irrational in love.*

I heard that, Albray called after me.

‘Good,’ I muttered, without looking back.

Don’t mention me in his presence, or the stone, or Ashlee’s journal. He gave me his instructions as an afterthought.

You must think me daft. I reached Molier’s abode and knocked.

I waited for the door to be answered and desperately tried to recall the subject matter of the conversations I had had with Albray, prior to Akbar informing me that my tent was probably bugged. I had surely mentioned Albray’s name—probably Ashlee’s and Molier’s as well. Had I mentioned my relationship to Ashlee? Maybe Molier was not aware that I was a daughter of the blood? Doubtful, or why would he have come? For the opening of the gate, of course—the inscription apparently stipulated only that a woman bearing bread was required to enter first. How many people would translate this to mean a daughter of the Grail bloodline?

Keep an open mind, I reminded myself. Much of what I knew about Molier had come from a two-hundred-year-old journal and a knight who had been dead for eight hundred years! Time to apply my logical, questioning, scientific mind to this conundrum—it had virtually not had a look-in since I’d met Albray.

Two hours later, following a very pleasant evening, I stepped back out of the caravan, unharmed and unruffled.

Molier hadn’t broached any of my taboo subjects. He had given me Lillet’s manuscript to read because it related to the history of the site. Molier’s was the only copy of the scroll in existence, and it had been passed down to him through the ages via his ancestors—along with his melatonin disorder. Either Molier was a very cunning liar, or he did not have my tent bugged and Albray was mistaken in his belief that this was the same man who had taken his life. Maybe, in the afterlife, Albray had lost touch with earthly matters?

Well, that was pleasant, Albray commented cynically as I entered my tent.

Yes, it was, I concurred. *Sorry if all our industry talk bored you.*

Molier was quite the historian and had told numerous stories about many of the sites I’d only dreamed of visiting, both actual and mythological.

Albray was clearly unnerved by how smoothly the evening had progressed. I had to admit that from where I stood there was little actual evidence to support his claims about Molier.

And what did your etheric sight tell you about the man? he queried. *Did you not plainly see how dark his light centres are?*

I could hardly sit there and go into a trance, I argued, trying to avoid admitting that the thought had not occurred to me. *I think he might have been a bit suspicious.*

Albray did not take the news well. *There is no point in having psychic ability if you don't use it!*

Well, getting mad at me is hardly going to aid your cause. I moved to my desk and switched on the light.

My cause! He was now infuriated. *It's not my life at stake here.*

I turned to confront him, aware of the intense anger I projected. *I never felt under any threat before I met you,* I pointed out, and the look on his face told me that I had cut too deep. Even I realised then that I was sounding like Lillet.

Albray's jaw was clenched and, for a moment, he could not look at me. *Do you want to know what I liked so much about Miss Granville?* He finally raised his dark eyes to mine. *She was always prepared to give me the benefit of the doubt. She was a good friend.*

My heart sank. *I am your friend. I just need—*

He held up a finger to warn me against continuing. *Our business this evening seems concluded...so if I may be dismissed?* He motioned to the bag in which the stone was hidden.

I obliged and as he vanished my heart was suddenly mournful that there would be no blissful dreams of love-making this night. 'All the more reason to keep reading, I guess.'

FROM THE HONEYMOON JOURNAL OF LADY SUSAN DEVERE

I have been separated from my journal for some time and have not had the opportunity to chronicle the events that occurred after reaching Marseilles with my husband. I shall do so now, and cast my mind back to the frightful time of my abduction.

I recall arriving in the lovely seaport of Marseilles quite late in the day. Lord Devere and I found a rather exclusive and lavish hotel in which to take up residency whilst awaiting word from Mr Devere and our dear sister.

Unbeknownst to me, my lord had arranged a surprise for the following day, and over breakfast in the dining room he announced as much.

I asked him what I'd done to deserve a surprise and he replied, 'You married me.'

It was moments like this which made it plainly obvious to me what a sound life decision that had been.

After breakfast we strolled down to the huge seaside marina where locals and guests alike were taking their leisure on the water in all manner and size of craft. The sun was shining, the breeze had a warm edge and there was hardly a cloud in the sky.

'Lovely weather for boating, I presume.' I had never had the opportunity to try leisure cruising before.

'You think?' My lord's tone of voice was rather neutral, and my heart sank. Obviously, my surprise lay elsewhere. But when I was led to a wharf where several small, but grand, sailboats were moored, I realised my husband had been teasing me.

'You are going to take me sailing!' I squeezed his arm tightly.

'Would that be pleasing to my countess?' He smiled broadly.

'I could think of nothing that would please me more,' I said, although I did have one worry. 'I didn't know you knew how to sail, my lord?'

'Did you not?' He pretended to be surprised that he'd never mentioned it. 'Well then, aren't I the man of mystery.'

'So it would seem,' I said admiringly, and kissed his cheek.

When we arrived at our vessel, aptly named *My Only Love*, I was completely delighted by the single-berth sailboat. The owner told Lord Devere that a large hamper of food was in the cabin as requested and that he would expect our return by evening the next day.

I was absolutely ecstatic to learn we were to spend a night on the water together. The notion was incredibly romantic, in my opinion.

'What if our brother comes to Marseilles looking for us?' I asked, wondering if Lord Devere had overlooked this possibility.

'I feel sure it will take more than a day for my brother to resolve all issues with his wife. In the meantime, I cannot see why we should waste the

opportunity to enjoy our honeymoon. I have left word with the consulate and a message at the guesthouse that we shall return on the morrow,' he assured me.

It seemed my husband had overlooked nothing.

The day was spent sailing around just beyond the port. We did not want to venture too far, in case the weather turned bad. We needed only enough distance from civilisation to secure a little privacy and room to manoeuvre.

My lord seemed to be in his element on the water and I admired how he handled the rigging and generally had complete control of the vessel. I played my part several times when, to my great delight, my husband allowed me to take a turn at the rudder.

Coming on to evening we dropped anchor within sight of the city, had a picnic dinner on deck and then watched the sunset as Marseilles lit up in the distance.

I don't think I have ever known a more perfect day, and my relationship with my husband reached a level of closeness that I'd never thought might be possible. He left the Earl of Oxford back at port and was just James Devere, the man—my husband and dear friend.

At sundown we retired to our cabin which was dimly lit with gas lanterns.

My husband went first and then lent me a hand to descend the slim stairs. 'You realise that out here we have no friends to visit, dinner parties or dances to attend. Whatever shall we do with ourselves all evening?' His cheeky grin was extremely seductive.

'I fear that we shall be forced to retire early, my lord.' I closed the distance between his lips and mine. 'And as I have no maid to help me undress, perhaps you could be of assistance?'

'Oh, the hardship of being at sea.' His kiss lulled me into a state of complete abandonment, and within moments we were horizontal on the cabin's large bed.

This seemed the perfect end to the perfect day, until we felt our vessel bump into something and there was the sound of a scuffle up on deck.

'What was that?' I panicked, my mind instantly leaping to conclusions. 'Pirates?'

‘This close to the harbour?’ My husband’s reasoning set my mind at ease. ‘We’ve probably hit a log or something.’ He shrugged, far more interested in caressing my inner thighs.

He moved in to resume kissing me, until I held him at bay when we felt another bump.

‘Would you like me to go and check?’ he offered reluctantly, knowing full well that that was precisely what I desired. ‘Don’t move.’ He stole a kiss before embarking on his investigation.

No sooner had Lord Devere scaled the cabin stairs than he was landing back on the floor with a thud, and four masked men leapt down into our quarters—all armed with swords.

They dragged my husband to his feet and my lord retaliated, elbowing one man in the stomach while managing to retrieve his sword. He began fighting off the other masked men. One of the swordsmen slipped by him, however, to hold a blade at my throat. Lord Devere had no choice but to relinquish his weapon.

‘Lady Susan Devere?’ the man who held me captive inquired. Since my husband was held at swordpoint once more, I feared for our lives too much to lie. I nodded, whereupon my husband was asked to turn around and was knocked unconscious with the hilt of a sword.

I screamed and then begged my captors not to harm him any further. I vowed to cooperate with whatever it was they had in mind for me, if they would only spare my husband’s life.

The man holding me captive nodded. The others then bound and gagged Lord Devere and left him on the cabin floor.

I was hauled up the cabin stairs, and I knew that if there was any chance of my kin finding me I needed to leave something behind that might supply a clue—something belonging to my abductors that might have a psychic imprint on it. I pretended to trip and grabbed at the coat of the man in front of me, ripping the pocket from his jacket. I surreptitiously flung the piece of fabric into the cabin behind me, while the man grumbled about my clumsiness. I was hauled upright once again and urged forward.

Up on deck, it was easy to see that the bump we’d heard had been made by the large vessel that was tied up to our own. ‘Where are you taking me? What do you want?’

The masked men ignored my questions and thrust me aboard their vessel. I was horrified when I saw the last man to leave our boat raise the anchor.

‘No! He’ll drift out to sea!’ I appealed, but my heartfelt pleas fell on deaf ears.

The kidnapper’s vessel got under way and I was left alone on deck to watch my husband’s boat drift aimlessly. It occurred to me to jump overboard and swim back to my lord’s aid. Admittedly, I hadn’t swum since I was a child, and the clothes I was wearing would be weighty and cumbersome once wet. The buttons were at the back of my frock, but they were already partially undone, thanks to my lord’s attempts to disrobe me. It was my hope that I could rid myself of my heavy outer garments once I hit the water, as I certainly wasn’t game to remove them on a ship loaded with strange men.

I rose up to tip myself over the safety rail, when my arms were grabbed and I was hoisted back on board.

‘You cannot leave yet, my lady,’ said the bandit who had thwarted my escape attempt. ‘There’s someone who wants to see you.’ He set me on my feet and pushed me in the direction of the cabins.

FROM THE TRAVEL JOURNALS OF MRS ASHLEE DEVERE

At the British consulate in Marseilles we learned of the hotel Lord and Lady Devere were residing at, and at the hotel we were advised that the couple were not expected back from boating until later in the day.

This confirmed Albray’s claim that we would find Lord Devere off the coast in a small leisure craft. Mr Devere was not as ready to believe everything Albray said as I was and my husband felt the need to check my knight’s story before rushing off to hire a boat and crew.

Cingar proved true to his word. At the docks, he was greeted warmly by many mariners who were all willing to negotiate a good price to service our needs. The field of bidders was narrowed down when we told them that we’d most probably need to purchase passage to Italy, and might even require passage as far as Alexandria.

In the end, it was an Italian captain who secured our payment. He went by the name of Falcone Bellaccino, although his crew referred to him as

Captain Falco. He was bound for Napoli and then Sicily, and did not object to taking a few detours. His vessel, a medium-sized trade ship, was stocked, crewed and ready for immediate departure which was very much in his favour. We were assured that, once the last of the ship's cargo was offloaded in Sicily, Captain Falco was prepared to take us anywhere in the Mediterranean that we wished to go—as long as we were prepared to make it worth his while.

Cingar, Jessenia and another male from the gypsy band would accompany us to find Lord Devere. We would need to sail the hired leisure vessel back to port. Without doubt, Lord Devere would wish to join us in the pursuit of his wife, provided that my brother-in-law had not been too badly hurt during Susan's abduction. The other men of Cingar's clan who had escorted us to Marseilles would return the horses to the gypsy caravan. Cingar promised that his clan would take the greatest care of Destiny, my treasured steed. I'd never thought to become so attached to an animal, and I knew I would miss this horse during the journey ahead. Be that as it may, I could not bring myself to subject the thoroughbred to a prolonged sea voyage to a far-off land with a climate vastly different to the lush lands of France.

Albray had told me exactly where we would find Lord Devere's boat, and my husband did not have the means or time to check this particular claim. Captain Falco was understandably curious about our certain knowledge of the position of our friend's missing craft, and even how we knew the craft was missing—given that our brother and his wife were not expected back until later this day. We convinced the captain that it was our best guess, and as we were paying him well he didn't mind obliging our whims.

I held no misgivings, knowing that Lord Devere's vessel would be found exactly where Albray had said it would, but Mr Devere was clearly surprised when the lookout spotted a small boat adrift.

'Are you sure this is James' vessel?' My husband persisted in his suspicions as the captain brought our larger vessel alongside the leisure craft.

Albray served my husband a presumptuous glance. 'May your wife banish me from her service forever if I am wrong.'

Devere found this challenge uplifting, since he would be pleased by the outcome either way. Although Albray was but a ghost, my husband clearly resented another male being so close to me and I did my best to ignore his jealousy. Despite my marriage vows and my love for my husband, Albray was still a most trusted ally. I was not prepared to give up his counsel short of completing the quest my dear Lord Hereford had set for me.

Devere and Cingar boarded the smaller vessel and then aided me to embark—sea travel was a new experience for me and I was yet to find my sea legs.

My husband was relieved to discover his brother bound and gagged in the cabin, but still alive. The discovery was also heartbreaking, as Susan's disappearance was now confirmed.

'Thank god, Earnest,' Lord Devere exclaimed when his gag was removed. 'How on earth did you find me so quickly?'

'I have a gift,' Earnest replied, cutting through his brother's bonds.

'Lady Devere has been abducted,' the lord advised in a panic.

'I know,' Earnest answered calmly.

'How could you know?' Then he waved off his irrelevant question to ask a more pressing one. 'Do you know who took her?'

'We have a suspicion,' Earnest advised his brother.

'We?' James queried and upon looking around to sight me, the lord's mood soured as he got to his feet. 'The catalyst of this entire mess,' he accused, ready to unleash his pent-up rage on me. The lord's light-body, usually free of blemish, now sported a growing dark mass over his heart.

'I am as concerned as you for Susan's wellbeing. She is my oldest and dearest friend—' I tried to head off the impending outburst.

'You have a fine way of showing your friendship,' he snapped. 'Expecting my wife to lie for you and place herself in danger several times over, all to satisfy *your* agenda.'

'This was not my wife's fault!' Earnest diverted his brother's anger toward himself. 'If anyone is to blame, it is me.'

'Absolutely correct,' James agreed. 'You and your mysteries.' He glanced from my husband to me. 'Allow me to let you in on a little secret I've discovered during this misadventure of ours. There is only one great mystery in this world and that is how two individuals, in a world of people,

can find true love and happiness the like of which I and my wife shared! And now, thanks to your duplicity with each other, the one soul I truly care about has been stolen from me and taken god knows where!’

My brother-in-law’s words bit deep into my heart, for I had found my true love at the cost of my dearest friend losing hers. I cast my eyes downward in shame and spotted a piece of torn fabric lying on the floor of the cabin. ‘Is this yours?’ I retrieved the item that captured my interest.

‘I cannot believe you, Mrs Devere.’ James was clearly vexed by the distraction.

Having the fabric in hand, I could answer my own question, for I received a brief vision, from Susan’s perspective, of her ripping the piece of cloth from the jacket of one of her abductors. ‘No, this belongs to one of the men who took Susan.’ I was excited at this discovery, as was my husband, who moved closer to me.

‘What can you see?’ he inquired, while his brother growled in disbelief.

I closed my eyes and focused on the clue. ‘The man who wore this is bound for Italy,’ I gasped and opened my eyes, ‘and he is in the service of Christian Molier.’

Lord Devere frowned. ‘Molier? Why do I recognise that name?’

‘The Arsenal Library in Paris,’ my husband said to jog his brother’s memory. James had never actually met Molier, but had heard about him in conversation.

‘Your associate in Paris!’ Lord Devere became decidedly steamed-up once more. ‘What does he want with Susan?’

‘He wants me,’ I said abruptly, to calm the man. ‘And there is no reason to believe that he will harm Susan.’

‘And I am expected to believe that, am I?’ Lord Devere protested at the leap of faith I was requiring him to make.

‘We found you, did we not? And we shall find Susan too.’ Tired of justifying myself, I turned and exited the cabin.

‘We have arranged to have this vessel taken back to port,’ Earnest advised his brother. ‘We can take up the pursuit of Lady Devere’s abductors immediately.’ He motioned James up the stairs.

James, holding on to his anger, was unsure about obliging us. ‘You had better be right about this, Earnest, or so help me god I’ll—’

‘I am sure,’ he confidently declared, before his brother could finish the threat. ‘But every second could be precious. Let us not dally here any longer than needed.’

The lord retrieved his few belongings from the cabin and accompanied his brother up on to the deck where I was arguing with Cingar. ‘Oh no, not gypsies,’ James whined in protest, but stopped short of accusing them of intending to steal the craft he’d hired, instead of returning it to port.

Both Cingar and myself chose to ignore Lord Devere to pursue our argument. ‘You only vowed to see me to the sea, which you have done, and now you must return to your people,’ I insisted.

‘My man will return this boat to port and Jessenia and I can rejoin our families in Italy once I know all is well with you.’ Cingar would not hear of departing yet, despite the assurances of my husband and I that we could take it from here.

After four days at sea, I was more deathly ill than I had been during my first day on the waters off Marseilles. It was clear that ship life did not agree with me at all. My husband had looked a little green for a couple of days, but had grown accustomed to the boat’s rocking and was now as fit as a fiddle and rather enjoying the voyage.

I was very grateful that Cingar and his wife had insisted on accompanying us to Italy. Jessenia was a tireless nurse and succeeded in making me feel infinitely better than if I had had to cope with my illness alone.

‘Captain Falco said to inform you that we should be in sight of the Tiber today,’ Jessenia announced when she brought me breakfast in my cabin, where I had spent most of the voyage.

At the mouth of the Tiber River we would pass the ancient city of Ostia, on our way to the modern port that lay a few miles upstream. Here large craft docked and passengers for Rome could hire smaller craft for a journey up the river, or travel overland to the Holy City. This was where I hoped to spy the vessel that had carried Susan away. I had received an impression of the boat from the piece of torn fabric I had found. Albray had assured me that he could confirm my vision, for he had witnessed the abduction first-hand and seen the vessel for himself.

‘Dry land would be a dream come true.’ I forced a smile as I sat upright to try and force myself to eat something. This meal could actually be considered as a lunch. My stomach always seemed to be more unsettled following a horrid night’s sleep and I could not take food too early. My nights at sea had been plagued by vivid dreams of searching for something I couldn’t find: these left me drenched in sweat and had me awake every few hours.

‘I have a real treat today,’ Jessenia boasted. ‘Freshly made bread, and a pot of real tea, compliments of the captain’s private stock.’

I was delighted. Tea was a rarity at sea. I had been craving a warm brew, and plain fresh bread, baked daily by the ship’s cook, seemed to be the only food I could stomach. ‘You are an angel.’ I emphasised my delight. ‘Do thank the captain for me.’

‘He wishes only to see you well again.’ My beautiful gypsy nurse poured a cup of tea and passed it to me on a saucer.

I took a couple of sips and then sighed with delight.

‘It is surely unusual for someone to remain seasick for so long,’ Jessenia ventured to comment as she pulled up a chair and sat at my bedside. ‘In fact, I am beginning to suspect that it is not just the sea voyage that is causing it.’

I scoffed at her concern. ‘I have rarely known a sick day in my life.’ A fact that was making my current plight all the harder to tolerate. ‘Do I have the symptoms of some other illness?’

‘The sickness in the morning, the vivid dreams, the perspiring and broken sleep,’ she listed. ‘They all seem to add up to pregnancy.’

‘Pregnancy!’ I objected, and the cup rattled violently in its saucer. Jessenia relieved me of it. ‘Please, goddess, *no*.’

Jessenia smiled at my referral to the goddess, for her people were avid believers in the Great Mother, Danu, or Diana, whose daughter Aradia brought all witchcraft to the world. ‘Is it possible that this could be the case?’ She attempted to dispel my horror until I’d examined the possibility thoroughly.

‘I suppose...’ I was reluctant to admit I had not bled since I’d been reunited with my husband. My monthly time was now well overdue. The realisation made my stomach turn, for many reasons, and finding my bedpan my compulsion was obliged.

A pregnancy could place my whole mission in peril, for if Devere found out, I was fairly confident he would do everything in his power to prevent me travelling further. I was even more fearful of Devere's secret brotherhood discovering I was with child, for I suspected they hoped for this very outcome when they had matched me with Devere in the first place.

'You haven't mentioned your suspicions to anyone, have you, Jessenia?' I tried not to sound as panicked as I felt. I was relieved when Jessenia shook her head. The poor woman obviously didn't know what to make of my unfavourable reaction.

'My people believe it is a great blessing to fall with child so early in a marriage.'

I forced a smile, knowing she was happy for me. 'How long until it starts to show?' I knew nothing about children or childbirth, as it was hardly a course of study that had ever interested me.

'Maybe ten weeks,' she advised, 'but as you are so slight, perhaps less.'

'And how long to Alexandria from Sicily?'

Jessenia was starting to catch the drift of my questioning. 'Two to three weeks at the most.'

With any luck I could complete my journey to the Sinai and be back home in England before my husband became aware of my condition.

'I would be very grateful if we could keep this theory between us for the time being,' I requested.

'But surely your husband will be overjoyed?' She edged around making any promise.

'I should not get his hopes up until I'm more certain of my condition, and even then I should wait until it is clear that I am likely to carry the child to full term,' I lied. The gypsy woman would not have understood my true concerns, even if I had been able to share them with her.

'It is hardly my place to go against your wishes,' she assured me. 'But I should take care, if I were you, of what activities you indulge in, as your body could be more prone to suffer injury and fatigue.'

'No more thundering around on horseback and clashing swords with bandits then.' I made light of her warning.

Jessenia smiled, although her concern did not lift. 'As most mothers would tell you, your body and your life are no longer your own.'

Here I was, a psychic, and yet I'd been unable to predict my own pregnancy! Now that Jessenia had suggested it, however, I knew her hunch was correct. I did not feel at all myself; rather, I felt a sensation similar to that of Albray seizing control of my body. It seemed I now only had partial control over my own being; there was another will operating inside me that was just as determined to have its way. I immediately noticed how hungry I was; the poor little mite must have been starving.

I reached for the bread and began to devour it.

Now that I'd accepted my predicament, perhaps I'd be able to overcome this illness and keep food down.

Later that day I felt much improved, and was able to make my way up to the deck to view the port at the mouth of the Tiber River.

The vessel that had stolen Susan away was not hard to spot. There were few large vessels moored here at present, and it was particularly extravagant in design.

'That's it, *The Sea Grail*.' I pointed it out.

I agree, Albray advised Devere and me.

'Sounds like a name the brothers would use,' Devere noted, not as sceptical as usual; he'd obviously psychically scrutinised the fabric, too. 'She's light in the water,' he commented to his brother, who realised that this was not to our advantage.

'If this is the vessel we seek,' Lord Devere paused to emphasise his words, 'and she's not carrying cargo, she may have arrived quite some days ahead of us.' He was angered by this possibility, and even more vexed at the means we were using to advise him.

I'll go see if your friend is still on board. Albray vanished to go about his mission.

'And how are we to know for sure whether Susan is on board?' Lord Devere queried. 'We can hardly just climb on and search it.'

'I have certain sources who are currently finding out for me,' I replied, 'although I doubt very much that you would want to know any more than that.'

My husband cringed, able to foresee the clash of beliefs that was about to take place.

‘I am hardly going to invade another vessel on some supposed spirit’s say-so!’ Lord Devere was very close to losing his temper.

‘Fine,’ I assured him. ‘No one is forcing you to come.’ I turned and walked to the opposite side of the deck to avoid any further unpleasantness.

‘Maybe you should leave this to us?’ my husband said, as he could see that Lord Devere was frustrated by my response. ‘After all, it is our fault that Lady Devere was abducted. If we are wrong about this vessel, then only we shall suffer the consequences.’

‘And what if you are right?’ Lord Devere reasoned with himself. ‘How would it appear to my wife if I have not participated in her rescue?’

Earnest smiled, sympathetic to his brother’s feelings. ‘You have more chivalry than commonsense, it would seem.’ His smile turned into a cheekier grin.

‘And this is surprising to you?’ Lord Devere let his anger go, resigning himself to following our lead, for better or worse.

‘Not really,’ Earnest admitted. ‘I think it runs in the family.’ He looked at me and noted Albray suddenly appear. He joined us to hear the knight’s report.

Lady Devere is still on board, under guard. They have her locked in quarters below deck, beyond the galley.

‘Great!’ My husband wasn’t at all inspired by the news. ‘We’ll only have to sneak past the entire crew to get to her.’

You see all those windows just below the bow of the ship. Albray pointed them out. One of the windows on the other side belongs to the cabin where your friend is being held.

‘Locked, you said?’ Devere queried.

Padlocked on the outer door and inner window.

My husband was again disheartened.

But the windows are only made of glass and timber. Albray smiled and, catching his drift, Devere smiled too.

‘Where is Molier?’ I thought to ask.

Not on board, but I shall track him down once you have finished with me and report back.

‘And the Fire vial?’

It is on board, locked in an iron safe. I have never before seen a lock the like of it, for there is no hole for a key.

‘We should just concentrate on getting our sister to safety.’ Devere warned me against pushing our luck.

‘Of course, you’re right,’ I agreed, my mind still mulling over how to get around Molier’s security measures. ‘I think we could do with some professional help. I need to consult with Cingar. Perhaps there is a way of gaining access without smashing any windows and raising the alarm. The more of a head start we can get on our journey eastwards the better. Albray,’ I turned to my knight, ‘I am guessing Molier is somewhere between here and Rome. Please find out how many days he is away.’ He vanished and we turned to seek out Cingar, only to find Lord Devere staring at us, undoubtedly concerned for our mental health.

‘Who on earth are you both talking to?’

‘You don’t want to know,’ Earnest advised.

‘The good news is that Susan is on board,’ I added on a positive note. ‘And I believe I have a plan.’

‘Grand.’ Lord Devere forced a smile. ‘That is so very reassuring.’

With a bag full of gold francs supplied by Lord Devere, Cingar and his wife rowed ashore and were able to secure the aid we required.

Albray returned that afternoon. He had discovered that Molier was indeed in Rome, negotiating with the Vatican over the collection of rare biblical texts, and it would take several days for him to rejoin his vessel.

Come nightfall, the Devere brothers, Cingar and I rowed across to the wharves and waited in the rowboat. Cingar’s ‘aid’ was due to arrive soon. Our target was docked at the end of the longest wharf. To ensure a fast getaway, Captain Falco had moored offshore.

‘This may not work, you realise?’ my husband whispered to me. ‘These men could well be sworn to chastity by their order.’

‘Were you?’ My question was rhetorical. ‘Besides, they’re Frenchmen.’

‘Here they come.’ Cingar pointed to the small crowd of ladies making their way up the wharf, their arms loaded with supplies.

‘Ahoy there!’ the woman in front yelled, before ascending the gangway.

When members of the crew spied the gathering of women, whistles and cries of approval sounded. ‘What can we do for you, ladies?’

‘It is more what we can do for you, gentlemen,’ the lady replied. ‘Lord Molier instructed us to feed his men in his absence. We have brought fresh food, wine and company. May we come aboard?’

Molier had left one of his personal staff on board to keep an eye on the crew, and he was hesitant to give consent. However, he was eventually persuaded by the rest of the crew to allow the women on board—they knew as well as he did that their superiors would not be back for days, in any case.

‘I still don’t know about this.’ Lord Devere was very edgy.

Albray motioned to the bow, where I spied Susan watching the commotion from a window.

‘My lord...’ I gestured to the window and upon sighting his love, Lord Devere leapt to his feet. ‘Susan!’

‘Shhh!’ All three of us yanked him down to a huddled position. Thankfully, our prey had not heard a thing over the din they made welcoming the whores.

‘My wife *is* here,’ James said in amazement.

‘You were in doubt?’ I teased, relieved that my brother-in-law would finally throw his all into our quest. *Well sighted*, I commended silently to Albray, thankful for the timely intervention.

Anything to stop him whining, Albray commented, and both my husband and myself had to smother our amusement.

‘I take back every negative comment I’ve ever made about your methods.’ Lord Devere finally awarded us our due. ‘I shall never doubt you again.’

Praise the Great Mother, a convert!

‘Best wait until this rescue is over before you start thanking us,’ Mr Devere suggested, settling back against the side of the boat to await the signal from our decoys that it was clear to board.

An hour or so later the whistle came, and we crept from our rowboat onto the wharf and made our way swiftly up the gangplank.

‘All dead to the world,’ announced the woman in charge of the covert mission, and her associates chuckled.

‘I guess my great-grandmother’s sleeping potion really works,’ Cingar commented, amused, as we moved past the unconscious crew.

‘If it works nearly as well as her sleeping spell, they’ll be out for days,’ said Devere, a little spitefully, having been a victim of the spell.

‘It’s not quite as potent. Depending on how much they’ve consumed, it should keep them under for the better part of a day.’ I was delighted by the result, despite my husband’s feelings about my methods. ‘I am truly blessed to have a gypsy witch among my otherworldly associates.’

‘Don’t say any more,’ Lord Devere pleaded in a whisper. ‘That’s really a bit more information than I need to know.’

My brother-in-law was a good Christian and I well knew that my connections and means were too unorthodox and unnerving for him. ‘I feel certain god will not send you to hell for using heathen means to save your wife.’ I couldn’t resist a dig at his staunch religion, in which I held no faith whatsoever.

‘Indeed.’ He didn’t agree. ‘I think I am most fortunate that we live in this century and not the fifteenth, or we’d all be burning for tonight’s deeds.’

‘Only if we get caught,’ I retorted boldly, and the lord ventured a smile.

At the entrance to the galley level stairs we were met by one of the most attractive of the ladies, dangling a set of keys taken from her unconscious victim. “Twas as easy as taking sweets from a baby.’

I graciously took the keys from her and cast my eyes back to Lord Devere, who bowed his head to concede his admiration and gratitude. Then we headed below.

Albray led me to the room where Susan was being held captive and after a short guessing game with the keys, we finally found one that fitted the lock and the door swung open.

‘James!’ Susan exclaimed in disbelief, and rushed into his waiting arms. ‘I’ve been so worried.’ She shed tears of relief that he’d not perished at sea. ‘How did you escape?’

James motioned back to Earnest and me, who waved from the doorway. ‘I knew that somehow you’d know.’ Our dear sister rushed to embrace us both. ‘You found my clue?’

‘We did.’ I squeezed her briefly, shedding a tear of relief myself. ‘We can discuss this later, as time is something we don’t have an abundance of.’

‘Too true,’ James agreed, grabbing Susan’s hand and leading her down the passageway, to where Cingar was waving at us to hurry up.

‘Cingar has booked passage for you both on a ship bound for France early tomorrow. He’ll lead you to your transport.’ I backed up in the opposite direction.

‘And where do you think you are going, Mrs Devere?’ My husband, who’d headed after the others, halted.

‘You know that there is something else I have to do,’ I said regretfully. ‘I am unsure of how long it might take and have no wish to endanger anyone further. I shall meet you back at the rowboat as soon as I can.’

‘I am not departing without you,’ Devere and Cingar insisted as one, which immediately made me furious.

‘When are you men going to learn that I can take care of myself!’ I had backed up to the corridor where Albray stood in wait for me.

‘We have to talk, Ashlee.’ Susan also implored me to leave with them. ‘Molier is more than he seems. He is dangerous beyond all imagination, even your imagination.’ Susan resisted her husband’s gentle tug toward the exit. ‘You must believe me. He is more powerful and dark than anything you have encountered in the past.’

‘I do believe you,’ I assured her, ‘but some events are fated, and we must rise to the challenge without thought for the cost.’ This is what Albray had done, and I glanced at him, proud that he was a kindred spirit. I didn’t have to know the details of his demise in service of the greater good; his whole being radiated the unmistakable aura of a hero, too decent to boast of his own miraculous deeds. ‘Take my kin to their transport, Cingar, or I shall never forgive you.’ I made a break for the corridor, following Albray—my husband was hot on my heels.

‘I should have known he’d be behind this,’ Devere commented when he saw Albray.

Albray stopped in front of a door and I shuffled through the keys in search of one that might fit the lock. ‘Either you are going to help us or not. If the answer is not, then please just leave us to it.’

‘Of course I’ll help.’ Devere stopped as he caught up with me. ‘I just wish you would confide in me every once in a while.’

We accomplish things faster when we act on our own. Albray fuelled my husband’s anxiety.

‘Albray,’ I cautioned him. ‘Do I have to dismiss you?’

‘What a good idea.’ Devere seconded the motion and I rolled my eyes, frustrated with the argument and my lack of success with the keys.

‘I shall insist that you both leave in a minute!’ I said crossly and stamped my foot. I shuffled through the keys once more. ‘Where is the key to this wretched door?’

Perhaps Molier has it? Albray was annoyed that he’d overlooked such a major detail.

I nodded. ‘None of these fit.’ I leant my head against the door, defeated.

‘Then there is no point in loitering here any longer.’ Devere was not unhappy at our failure.

You don’t seem to understand. Albray decided to enlighten our unwilling accomplice. *If we can steal the Fire vial then Molier loses his power...he is entirely dependent on its substance!*

‘Well, how are we expected to steal it if we cannot unlock the door?’ Devere retorted. ‘You’re being unreasonable and placing my wife in unnecessary danger.’

There is another way we might gain entry. Albray gave me a knowing look, implying I should recognise the means to which he referred. *Remember your escape from the library?* he hinted further, not wanting to give too much away before we were agreed.

‘How *did* you manage that?’ My husband’s curiosity made me uneasy.

Albray was suggesting that I use the substance contained in the Star vial hidden on my person, in order to penetrate the wall. The only problem was that I had not yet disclosed to my husband that I had this treasure, and given the enmity between my knight and Mr Devere, producing the vial at this moment was bound to cause more trouble.

I wouldn’t suggest it unless there was no other way. Albray attempted to assuage my suspicions that he might be trying to rile my husband.

‘Is it dangerous?’ Devere was immediately concerned for my welfare.

‘Not physically dangerous, no.’ I skirted around the question, knowing my husband was going to be very disappointed in me.

Devere backed up a step, sensing that Albray and I were again keeping secrets from him. ‘What then?’ His voice had an underlying sense of betrayal.

I figured the best way to break the news was to produce the item, so, putting my hand down the front of my garments, I drew out the vial.

My husband may have been awed by the presence of the vial, but he was emotionally confused at the same time. 'You've had it all along?'

'Hereford entrusted it to me,' I confirmed and Devere's hurt was obvious.

'You do realise I have the ability to read your mind?' He directed the question at me and I nodded. I was aware that his psychic powers had strengthened. 'At any time I could have read your mind and discovered your secret, but I did not! And do you know why?'

'Because you trust me?' I said timorously.

'More the fool me!' Devere barked, and turned away to contain his anger.

'I'm sorry I didn't tell you. I had to be sure you no longer served your brotherhood, who would probably do anything to obtain possession of this substance.' I referred to Hereford's death.

When Devere turned his eyes back on me, his expression was very dark indeed. 'After what Chavi Choron told you, you still doubt my loyalty? Tell me, how long until you forgive me my one misstep?'

And he wonders why we never tell him anything. Albray was fed up with the delay, but his comment made me fume.

'Dismissed.' I turned my ire on him.

No, don't, he appealed rather desperately.

'Dismissed...'

I'm sorry I spoke...but we are—

'Dismissed.' As Albray vanished, I looked at Devere.

'Thank you.' He seemed mildly pacified by the development.

'If I didn't trust you, I would not have produced the vial now,' I informed him, removing the stopper and placing a few of the tiny sparkling particles on my tongue.

'I don't see that you had much choice in this case.' Devere was unconvinced.

'If I had desired you to be absent I could have arranged that, believe me.' The substance caused my body to shiver with awareness. It was only then that I recalled my pregnancy and I was immediately concerned at the effect the Highward Fire-Stone might have on my developing baby. *A bit*

late to consider the consequences now... I scolded myself for not considering the child first. I replaced the Star's stopper and returned my treasure to its hiding place. When I looked up, Devere was smiling.

'I have not proven easy to shake off in the past, if memory serves,' he said, moving closer to become more intimate with me.

'I have been lenient on you.' I placed both my hands on the surface of the door.

'Is that right?' My challenge amused him.

I nodded. 'I shan't be long.' I focused my will on the object beyond my fingertips and, as I felt its solidity give way, I pushed myself on through to the other side.

'*That was amazing.*' My husband spoke through the door to commend me.

'Trouble is, it's pitch dark in here,' making my next feat a wee bit difficult. Then it occurred to me: 'The Star vial.' Producing the item, I was surprised at the amount of light it awarded in a pitch dark room. *Now where is this safe?*

It seemed I had dismissed Albray too soon, but rather than call him for help, I had another idea. I walked over to Molier's desk, to probe it for its owner's psychic imprints. Laying a palm upon it I perceived a cold, apprehensive premonition that compelled me to desist in my inquiry. I continued nonetheless and my attention was directed to a painting of the Black Madonna on the wall.

The sound of scratching on glass startled me. It was coming from beyond the drawn blinds in the cabin.

'Are you all right?' Devere requested an update, as he must have heard my gasp.

I approached the curtains and, swallowing back my fear, I drew the heavy fabric aside to discover a raven beyond the windows. It rasped at the thick glass with its claws, determined to penetrate it, and its angry squawks shot sharp waves of panic through my being, as if I was the cause of its senseless determination. 'Yes, I'm fine,' I answered Devere and breathed a sigh of relief. 'Shoo.' I urged the creature to give up its impossible quest.

My attention returned to the painting despite the bird continuing to make its ruckus. I crossed the room to search for a latch around the inner

back edge of the picture frame and upon triggering a mechanism, the picture swung open like a cupboard door. 'I've located the safe.'

Albray had been justified in saying that the lock that secured the iron door was rather ingenious. It was a long-barrelled padlock with no keyhole, just consecutive rings of numbers. I had heard of such devices, known as combination locks. They were an invention of the master craftsmen of the Orient. As lock picking had become an art in recent times, this type of lock was used to protect the holdings of the major banking establishments in Europe. Some of these had over a million combinations and to run through them all without interruption would take about two thousand years. It was fortunate for me that most of the world's inhabitants were ignorant of the art of psychometry. There were six numbered dials on this particular lock and as I placed my finger on the first ring of numbers I was compelled to roll it around to the number five; then the next dial suggested the number two, and the next number six.

'What do you think you are doing?'

I heard a stranger's voice echoing down the hallway beyond the room.

'Someone is awake,' my husband advised me through the door, and I heard him draw the gypsy sword that he still wore.

'I'm almost there,' I yelled back, hoping he could hold our foe for just a few more seconds. I locked the fourth and fifth numbers into place. Once the sixth number revealed itself, I expected the lock to somehow open, but instead the end of the cylindrical lock fell away to reveal a keyhole. 'Damn it!' I uttered under my breath, concerned for my husband as I heard swords clashing outside the door. I could not will the lock undone, but I could try to reach through the solid iron door.

It's no different to changing the composition of the parchment, I recalled Albray advising me in the library. You have the ability to do this, but if you need faith in yourself then call upon the strength of your foremothers.

I closed my eyes to focus my intent on the thick cold iron at my fingertips.

Women of my blood . . .

*If my intent will serve the greater welfare,
lend to me your expertise,*

to turn this iron to air!

My entire body began to tingle with an empowering force that was distinctly feminine: soft, graceful and intuitive. I rested my hand on one of the strongest materials known to man, and willed the Fire vial to me. I had expected to feel crystal making contact with my palm, but what was drawn into my possession was velvet. I quickly withdrew my acquisition into the light of the Star vial.

Upon opening the red case I beheld the other half of the treasure I had been seeking—a vial, like that of the Star, that emitted a red light from a scarlet substance. I returned the Star to its usual resting-place in order to run my fingers over the glowing red treasure.

I am watching you, Mrs Devere.

I was startled by a malign whisper that registered in both my mind and my ears. The source was inside the room. It was only then that I realised the bird had ceased its protest. The temperature in the room had dropped. I swung around to confront the most horrific apparition I had ever encountered and could not prevent a squeal from escaping my lips.

For the most part the entity was composed of vapour. This seemed to be gaining entry to the room through the almost non-existent gaps around the closed windows. A pale, drawn face had taken form amid the vaporous presence: red eyes with yellow pupils that appeared all the more sinister in the red glow of the Fire vial lying in the open case in my hands.

I'd think twice before challenging me, the devilish entity advised me. *I've been wielding these powers a lot longer than you have.*

That's when I recognised the phantasm. 'Molier,' I uttered, astonished, as I backed toward the door.

The entity smiled and a red substance dripped from the sides of its mouth. *How can you possibly hope to outsmart a god?*

I wasn't about to debate the issue, for it was painfully clear that I had no idea of what Molier was capable of.

Upon my speedy return through the door, I collided with my husband and we both collapsed over a third party and onto the floor.

As I scrambled to my feet in a panic, my husband grabbed my wrist to reassure me.

‘It’s all right. I have already relieved him of consciousness.’ Devere believed my haste stemmed from fear of the swordsman on whom we’d fallen.

‘We have another concern.’ I looked back to Molier’s office to see the vapour spilling into the hallway from the keyhole and underneath the door.

‘What is it?’ Devere, spotting the phenomenon and sensing its ominous nature, got to his feet and we began to run down the corridor.

‘This is pointless.’ I abruptly halted and turned to confront the massing entity. ‘We can’t possibly outrun it.’

‘We have to try,’ Devere appealed, but I shook my head, not to be moved.

Albray, Albray, Albray. I had been a fool to dismiss my guardian.

As my knight’s spirit presence manifested behind me to perceive the foe we faced, he didn’t waste a second. *In the name of the goddess, I repel you! Say it.*

I repeated his words with the same sureness and authority that Albray had employed in citing the command to me.

I blind you to my being and banish you back to yours.

As I issued this command, I felt a great force gather at my back, just behind my heart where the Star vial now sat. This energy burst through my heart centre and shot outwards through my extended fingers in pursuit of the phenomenon that had threatened me.

A tormented wail sounded from the entity, and its vaporous substance withdrew back through the gaps in the door.

‘Woo-hoo!’ I acknowledged how liberating the experience had felt. I turned around to find my husband in a rattled state—he’d turned as pale as a sheet.

‘You speak in tongues now? Tongues that speak—what language was that—some sort of ancient Aramaic?’

‘What are you talking about? I was speaking English,’ I insisted, but as Devere adamantly shook his head, I turned to Albray. ‘Was I not?’

I didn’t do anything. He washed his hands of responsibility. *All I did was advise you to use the aid you had already rallied around yourself.*

‘My foremothers,’ I realised, amazed that they had literally spoken through me.

‘Then why the Eastern dialect?’ Then it dawned on Devere. ‘Unless you refer to her ancient foremothers?’ The man turned a shade paler still.

Albray smiled at my husband’s reaction. ‘Now you, too, have heard the combined feminine voice of the High Council of the Elohim, to whom I, your wife and yourself are but humble servants.’

‘The vials belong to them,’ Devere deduced, having been drawn into recollecting the tutelage he’d received from his brotherhood. ‘I had never truly believed that the female protectors written of in Grail legend existed.’

Where do you think the Arthurian accounts of a castle of women who guard the Grail sprang from?

‘Carbonek.’ Devere cited the name of the castle. ‘They also called it the Temple of Wonders...the Palace of Adventure.’

That is where we are bound.

Devere’s eyes shot across to Albray. ‘You know the whereabouts of this palace?’

I should do, I died there.

I looked from man to ghost and back again. ‘Would someone like to fill me in on what you’re both talking about?’

Gladly, Albray granted. *But would it not be better to discuss this on board our own vessel?*

‘For once I agree with you.’ Devere took hold of my free hand, as the other was tightly clutching a red velvet case. ‘Let us put some distance between this vessel and us...not that distance seems to matter any more.’

Molier cannot seek you in his spirit again. The command of the ladies of the Elohim will bind him to that.

‘But he is capable of other feats?’ I assumed.

As are the both of you, Albray assured me, motioning Devere and myself in the direction of the exit.

LESSON 19

COMPASSION

Although there were only a few chapters left of Ashlee's tale, the hour was late and my eyes begged for rest. I vowed that I would finish the journal first thing in the morning.

I switched off my light and lay my weary bones on my bed. My head was swirling with images of places and people I had read about today. Ashlee obviously admired Albray and trusted him implicitly; Lillet's account of him was the complete reverse. Could death change a man so much? And what of Molier? Again the two accounts differed vastly. Who was I to believe? Or was neither account credible enough to warrant too much consideration? After meeting with Molier today, I found the notion that he could be the beastly apparition in Ashlee's tale very hard to swallow.

The thought that Albray might visit me in my dreams tonight swept all other concerns aside. I remembered I had promised Albray I would keep the stone close.

Once I had retrieved the stone from my bag, I lay back holding it up by its leather band to watch it twirl back and forth.

I would have been prepared to give up this career-making assignment and any ancient secrets I might uncover here in the Sinai, if only Albray could be some guy I met back in Oz, who was alive, available and interested in a life with me. Was I actually admitting that my love for him had grown greater than my love of my work?

'I hate doubting you, Albray, but you're a hard character to work out,' I whispered so quietly that I barely heard it. *If only you would tell me your version of events.* A tear escaped my eyes as I tucked my charm under my pillow.

I was so tired, so weary of thought and emotion that sleep came swiftly.

The vivid colours and the lush provincial landscape sparked my recollection of seeing Albray kneeling before a woman dressed in scarlet by a fountain.

Lillet! I realised that I was going to see the priestess.

I feared for a moment that Albray, having been spurned by me, had turned to the past love of his life for comfort, but when I reached the ivy-covered stone walls where a gate granted entry to the priestess' garden, I found Lillet alone.

'Please.' The dark-haired beauty invited me to sit on the side of the fountain with her.

'Lillet du Lac?' I sought confirmation.

'Mia Montrose,' she said, completing the introductions, letting me know she was well aware who I was. 'I wish to tell you the rest of my story, if you will hear it.'

I sat myself down beside her, somewhat stunned by the concern that filled her voice and radiated from her being. Lillet felt like an old friend that I had not seen in some time, and she seemed well disposed toward me also, even though we had never met.

'I have long regretted ever putting ink to that parchment you read today,' the priestess admitted, 'for it is incomplete without the second scroll, and seriously misleading in many regards.'

'You seem a very different person to the woman who penned that account. I had expected you to be more...' I tried to think of a mild way of putting it so as not to offend my hostess'...forbidding.'

Lillet smiled to concede my intuition was fair. 'During that time I was completely filled with my own self-importance. I believed that I had reached spiritual perfection, when in fact all I had achieved was a profound lack of tolerance for the rest of humanity. I lusted after the divine liberation of death, and failed to realise what it was to truly live and care and love.'

'But the faith and holy order in which you were raised had a lot to do with that, surely?' I tried to justify her actions.

'My faith should have instilled a sense of unconditional compassion, love and, thus, wisdom in me, but none of these fine qualities did I display during my quest for our foremothers.'

'But you see your failings now, so somewhere along the road you must have had an awakening?' I said, as she was clearly repentant and wiser now.

‘I wish I could say I came to my senses through my own observations.’ She lowered her eyes, and had a moment to regain her composure and look at me once more. ‘It took a heart-wrenching lesson to make me realise my ignorance and lack of judgement, for in truth I had no right to be judgemental of anyone.’

‘But the incident in Antioch, when you found Albray—’

Lillet was shaking her head. There was no need for me to finish the sentence as she obviously knew where my accusation was leading. ‘He was only protecting me from myself and had already warned me that he would do so. Do you not recall his prediction after consuming the Highward Fire-Stone?’

I had read so much today that I had trouble recalling this part of her story. Lillet refreshed my memory.

‘Our love shall never be realised,’ he told me. He went on to say that he realised that if I submitted to my feelings for him, it would destroy everything I had worked my whole life to achieve. He also said that he would take steps to curtail his feelings. The way he sabotaged our relationship that night made it easy for me to shun him and any feelings I might have been entertaining regarding him. Albray knew that I would seek him that night and had I found him alone, I would have surely forsaken the sacred vows of my order.’

‘And would that have been such a bad thing?’ I asked her.

‘In retrospect,’ Lillet paused and smiled briefly, ‘I think not. However, at the time, I feel sure I would have regretted forsaking the ideals I held sacred for one night of passion. Such a moment of weakness would have caused me to question my worthiness to continue the sacred quest I had been assigned. Our feelings for each other were a threat to our goal and the clarity bestowed by the Highward Fire-Stone substance made Albray realise this.’

Her understanding stemmed from more than idle speculation; there was an authority in her statements that only came from true awareness. Did death award each soul complete knowledge of all the errors made in their life? That theory would certainly explain the difference between the knight I had come to know as Albray, and the knight that Lillet had known.

‘Albray has not changed so much,’ Lillet informed me, perceiving my inner thoughts as readily as the questions I verbalised. ‘It is only my

perception of him that has changed. He was always as gallant and loyal as he is now, but because I distrusted him, most of his heroism went unrealised by myself until it was too late.’ Again Lillet turned away from me to restrain her feelings of regret and hurt.

‘You were the death of him?’ I had remembered another of Albray’s predictions, recorded in Lillet’s writings.

She nodded. ‘Had I been capable of caring for another human being more than myself, I might have seen the truth of my situation, but as it was I didn’t have any doubt that Molier was the true guide sent to me by Marie de Saint-Clair. It wasn’t until we finally reached the temple ruins in the Sinai that the penny finally dropped.’

Our caravan scaled the rocky mount of Serâbit el-Khâdim slowly. Camels may not have been as accommodating as horses, but they were the transport for the obscure route we had chosen. We had followed the King’s Road down the inland side of the Dead Sea, and turned at Kerak into the desert wilderness to cut across country to Nekhl at the top of the Sinai. From Nekhl, only the Bedouins knew the route to the ruined temple of Hathor on Mt Serâbit, which was the reported place of origin of my treasure.

The story I’d been taught was that after Hugh de Payens discovered the Covenant, hidden in a vault complex beneath the Temple of Jerusalem during the first crusade, he also found documentation regarding a second Ark. This was hidden deep in the Sinai at the original mount where both Arks had been fashioned. The temple complex of Serâbit el-Khâdim was dedicated to the Egyptian goddess Hathor, who the secret orders would later refer to as ‘The Gold Beneath the Gods and the Electron beneath the Goddesses’—code for the protector of the temple of the Fire-Stone vial and the Highward Fire-Stone vial. A mission was launched by the knights under de Payens’ command to seek out this Star-Fire temple and secure the second Ark. The knights uncovered the secret passage, and even discovered the key to unlocking the Star-Fire complex in the ruined temple of Hathor above the passage. The men sustained heavy losses when many of them attempted to enter the underground complex without a woman to lead them in. Word was sent back to de Payens in Jerusalem of his knights’ failure to enter the temple. A high priestess of my order and bloodline, Lilith del Aquae, who had travelled to the Holy City to aid in decoding the ancient

scrolls beneath the temple in Jerusalem, volunteered to make the journey to the Sinai. She led the knights into the complex. In her presence the knights were able to penetrate the lower complex without falling victim to an invisible sonic burst that emanated from deep within the temple and literally knocked the life out of any man who attempted to descend the entrance path without a female in his company. It was discovered that a lever, just beyond the lower temple entrance, needed to be engaged to flood the pits in the outer chamber with a flammable liquid to stop the beetles from gaining access. Once the pits of the outer chamber of the temple were set ablaze, paths could be followed to the two side chambers. One of these housed the Star vial and the other contained the Fire vial, both of which could only be removed by the priestess. There was one other door that lay directly opposite the entrance of the outer temple chamber, and this was opened by placing the two vials in the carved spaces alongside the massive golden doors.

An inscription warned that no mortal man must enter the Ark chamber, but the knights of de Payens ignored the warning, instructing the priestess to open the doors. All the men who witnessed the opening of this chamber were said to have perished in a blaze of light. When the priestess emerged to confront the remaining members of the company of knights, she advised them that the second Ark had been discovered but would not be moved from its resting place—given that any man who tried to enter would die.

The door to the secret temple complex was again sealed and buried in dirt and sand. The knights left for Jerusalem with the keys to the Ark chamber in the safekeeping of Lilith del Aquae. Their party was ambushed by Arab assassins, who killed the priestess during the attack, along with most of the knights. But these Arab defenders of the Star-Fire Temple did not succeed in capturing the vials. One knight escaped and took the vials to de Payens in Jerusalem. It was decided that the keys should be transported back to Languedoc to my sacred order for safekeeping. The Order of Sion may not have gained possession of the second Ark, but as long as my order held the keys, nobody else could utilise the Ark's great destructive powers either.

As we neared our destination, I was sick with worry about how I would open the gateway to the complex we sought, given that Devere still had possession of the Star vial. Secretly, I was hoping that he was pursuing

our party—the Star vial alone was useless to him, as the Fire vial alone was to us. Ideally, he would be captured before Molier’s knights had a chance to fully excavate the gateway. Failing this, I knew from the legend I had been taught that there was a supply of the sacred Star substance hidden somewhere in the ruined Temple of Hathor. Perhaps I could discover it before I was forced to confess that Devere had stolen the Star vial from me? Molier and his knights would not be at all amused if they discovered we’d travelled through harsh desert conditions only to be unable to enter the temple. Even if we did manage to open the complex, returning only one of the vials would not complete my quest. What the hell had I been thinking, to not tell Molier the truth back in Antioch?

It was mid-afternoon when we had finally ascended the mount and arrived at the ruins of Hathor, and the sun was at its blistering best. As was usual for the Sinai, there was barely a cloud in the sky. To our great surprise and trepidation the circular gateway to the Star-Fire Temple was not only exposed, but also open! I recognised the gateway from the descriptions in the legends of Lilith del Aquae. They had been told to me many times, so that I would always remember them.

Somebody had reached the site before us, but only I suspected who that somebody was—my relief was as great as my foreboding. Yet, even if Devere had managed to open the gate he could not have entered without a woman in his company—unless, of course, he had found a Bedouin female to oblige him. When last I had seen him, he had certainly charmed at least one local female.

The notion made me incredibly angry, or was I just jealous that another woman had had the pleasure of assisting in the completion of his quest? Travelling with Molier had been very uneventful and I was grateful for the respect he and his men had shown me, but the truth was I did miss the thrill of Devere’s intoxicating company.

Molier was immediately on his guard. Of the forty knights in our company, he sent half further up the mount, where only a few remnants of the Temple of Hathor protruded out of the solid dirt terrain. It was allegedly a huge complex in ancient times. Behind the few partially exposed stone pillars bearing ancient hieroglyphs was a large rocky mound where a force might hide in ambush.

‘Word has it that the order of Melchi assassins who murdered Lilith del Aquae are as active and vigilant today as they ever were, so we can’t be too careful,’ Molier explained. ‘They, too, want what we have.’ He motioned me toward the open gateway. ‘So, if you will lead the way, I’ll have the rest of my men stay close to you in case any intruders have entered before us.’

Molier ordered our Bedouin guides to stay and watch over the camels and they appeared more than content to do so.

There was a steep path, glimmering red, which led down into the shrine. The path was part of a long round tunnel covered with hieroglyphs.

‘It’s solid gold!’ commented one of the knights, holding a torch up and illuminating the passageway as he trailed Molier and myself down the smooth red path.

‘I’d like to know what all these hieroglyphs say,’ stated another, who sounded more fearful than inspired.

‘They speak of the Council of Goddesses for whom this temple was built, over which Hathor—the goddess of the Desert Mountains of the Dead, goddess of Fertility and She Who Shines—resides,’ I informed them, glancing over the ancient language, the learning of which was part of the earliest teachings of my order. ‘It warns that this is an ancient feminine space and that the council will only meet in the field of *Mfkzt* with the daughters of Isis.’

‘The field of *Mfkzt*?’ queried the knight who’d been so interested in the glyphs.

‘Some say it refers to a dimension of the Blessed—the Realm of the Orbit of Light,’ I said, ‘while others think *Mfkzt* refers to some mineral like gold, or turquoise.’

‘What do you think it means?’ the knight ventured to inquire.

‘*Death*—to any man who might be curious enough to try and find out,’ I stated, although I suspected that the mysterious word referred to both the Bread of Life and to the divine realms to which one would ascend if partaking of it.

‘Less chatter,’ Molier cautioned. ‘If the enemy lies in wait, let us not advertise our descent.’

I sensed Molier was a little unnerved by my comment, which was unusual for a man who was always so sure of himself. I supposed he was aware of the tale of Lilith del Aquae and of the fate of the men who had

accompanied her into this shrine—perhaps all these knights knew the tale? Still, we were not here to retrieve the treasures within; we were here to return the stolen and much-prized keys, and so had little to fear.

When we entered the large outer chamber, Molier sent his men off down a stone pathway that led around the circular chamber in both directions. As the men spread out and their torchlight began to fill the huge void, I was stunned by how well the shrine measured up to my expectations. I had formed an image in my mind from the descriptions handed down to me by my people.

The red-gold path we had entered upon flattened out and extended on through the chamber to a circular platform and the same distance again, on the far wall, was an arched door. From the central circular platform another path ran at crossroads across the chamber and the pathway we were walking along, and at each end of the crossroads was a pillared annexe. Concentric circles of sandstone bordered empty pits that were only a few feet deep. Over the central platform was a golden dome that rested on four grand pillars, each depicting a different Egyptian goddess.

Directly beside where we entered was the large lever that Lilith had activated to rid the complex of the deadly beetles, and Molier flipped it to fill the pits with a foul-smelling fluid.

‘Just in case,’ he commented, making it plain that he was aware of the legend that surrounded this site. Molier then invited me to escort him to the central platform underneath the glorious gold dome of the goddesses.

‘There is nobody else here, my lord,’ reported Molier’s second-in-charge, appearing as eager as the rest of the knights to be given his leave. ‘We have searched both the annexes.’

‘Very good,’ Molier said, and satisfied with the situation, he placed his torch into a hole in one of the pillars, designed for just this purpose. ‘Distribute your torches around this inner chamber then return to the entrance and guard it.’

The knight bowed dutifully, and giving a signal to his men, he placed his torch in another set of wall rings and withdrew, followed closely by the rest of the men.

All that could now be heard was the sound of fluid gushing into the canals surrounding us and the crackle of the fiery torches.

‘Well, my Lady du Lac, it would seem time to fulfil our long and arduous quest. Do you have the vials?’

‘I have them,’ I said, not moving to produce them, even though that was clearly what the lord was expecting. I moved toward the red-pillared annexe; at least I could return one vial to its rightful niche—once it was in place, I was the only one who could retrieve it.

I hadn’t taken two paces when Molier drew his sword, and held it to my throat. ‘Then produce the keys for me,’ he suggested.

‘Why should you require to see them?’ I maintained a cool countenance, despite the waves of fear that were contorting my insides into knots. I did not fear death, but how could I confront my maker when I had not completed my task? ‘It was your assignment to see me to this destination. The returning of the keys is my task alone.’

‘Who said anything about returning the keys?’ He held out his free hand and folded his fingers inward, repeating the gesture to indicate I should hand the keys to him.

‘But surely Marie de Saint-Clair warned you—’

‘I don’t work for Marie de Saint-Clair,’ he hissed, seemingly annoyed that I hadn’t worked that out yet. ‘No knight worth his salt would serve a woman!’

‘So Devere was—’

‘Telling the truth all along,’ he conceded in haste, and impatiently motioned for me to hand him the keys.

My head was spinning. What to do? My heart was breaking for having doubted Devere so many times. I was bombarded with memories of what he’d managed to overcome in order to get me here, and all I had done was make things difficult for him.

‘I could just kill you,’ Molier stated, to shock me out of my daze. ‘*Hand them over,*’ he articulated slowly, to ensure I knew it would be the last time he would ask.

I fished the Fire vial, hanging on a silver chain around my neck, out from inside my shirt. ‘To use the vials will surely kill you. What can you possibly hope to achieve by possessing them?’ I slipped the chain over my head and reluctantly handed the red vial to him.

‘Um...immortality,’ he suggested, as he snatched the vial from me and placed the chain around his own neck.

‘Only if you are of the blood,’ I pointed out and a glimmer of disapproval flashed across his face.

‘We’ll see about that when I unlock the Ark.’ Molier gestured for me to hurry up and hand over the second vial.

‘Have you not heard of what befell the men who tried?’ I was beginning to wonder if the heat had taken its toll on Molier’s sanity.

‘Ah, but I know something that they did not—nor you, for that matter,’ he teased. ‘A part of the legend of Lilith del Aquae was conveniently cut out of the official account, by the Grand Master of Sion, and only ever disclosed to the highest initiates of the order, of which I was one. That is before leadership was handed to de Gisors’ whore!’

‘Tell me the omitted detail,’ I stalled. I was afraid that he would kill me once he found out I did not have the second key.

Molier laughed at my request. ‘I hardly think so.’ He clicked his fingers. ‘Give it up.’

‘I don’t have it.’ I released a heavy sigh, and began mentally preparing myself to die.

Molier’s eyes narrowed; he obviously didn’t believe me. ‘Strip,’ he demanded, much to my horror.

‘I would never—’

The sharp sword point briefly pierced my skin and a warm trickle ran down my neck. ‘Think again.’

‘I swear I don’t have it.’ I covered the wound, which had brought tears to my eyes.

‘Then where is it?’ He grabbed hold of my hair in his fist and jerked my neck backwards.

‘I have it.’

Molier’s gaze shifted to Albray. He was standing on the path that ran around the chamber, between the entrance door and the white-pillared annexe, and he held high a glowing white vial in his hand. ‘Hand it over or I’ll kill her.’

‘Come and get it.’ Albray ran toward the white-pillared annexe and Molier took off in pursuit. If Albray managed to return the vial to its shrine, I was the only one who could retrieve it and thus I was no good to Molier dead.

‘Get out, Lillet,’ Albray shouted to me.

To put more distance between Molier and myself, I ran to the red-pillared doorway to take the path around the wall back to the entrance. I heard Molier curse as I ran, so I assumed Albray had beaten him to the shrine and had replaced the vial. Molier came speeding out of the white-pillared doorway and, seeing me heading for the exit, he headed off around the path also, hoping to cut me off before I made it to the tunnel entrance. Albray did not pursue Molier around the wall, but went straight ahead toward the central platform and the red-pillared annexe beyond.

Unsure if I could outrun Molier, I changed my course and ran back toward Albray. He embraced me and I was so delighted at his presence and intervention that I wholeheartedly returned the gesture. 'I've been such a fool!' I blurted out through my tears, with no time to say all that I really wanted to.

'I know,' he said forgivingly, just to annoy me, though he did not succeed.

Molier's pace had slowed, and he came to a stop in front of the exit. 'Neither one of you is leaving until I get that other vial.'

'The sun will set soon and the gateway will close. The Star vial is now locked safely in its resting place and the assassins, who hold your men captive, will bury the gateway as soon as it closes.'

'Then I had best kill you quickly.' Molier grinned, unfazed.

'As soon as I engage him, run for the exit,' Albray whispered in an aside to me.

'I'm not leaving without you,' I insisted, for I remembered well enough that Devere had predicted I would be the death of him.

'I'm afraid that is your destiny.' He gave me an amorous look, whereupon I kissed him with all the passion I possessed.

'Nothing is predestined,' I announced, having just rendered one of his predictions null and void.

He smiled lovingly as he backed up toward the central platform and away from me. 'I might have lied about the kiss,' he confessed and shrugged in apology.

'No,' I appealed, wanting nothing more than for him to survive. 'Kill me, and then there is nothing more to fight over.'

'Never.' He turned to confront Molier to see the man gulping down the contents of the Fire vial. 'Oh no,' Albray said, as Molier replaced the

stopper on the vial and then licked the blood-red liquid from the sides of his mouth.

‘Yum,’ he commented smugly, then gripped his head and cried out in pain. ‘No!’ he screamed, ahead of screeching even louder as the agony he felt drove him to his knees.

Albray ran to finish off Molier while he was disabled, but the sight of his foe slowly levitating into the air made Albray think twice.

Molier closed his eyes as his free-floating form began to spin around in circles.

Albray motioned to me to begin making my way around the wall toward the exit. ‘Are you going to come down here and fight like a man, Molier?’ Albray drew his sword.

‘I’m no longer just a man.’ Molier’s voice had deepened. His eyes shot open and his eyeballs shone yellow within red. ‘I am a god.’ He floated toward Albray, who backed up to lead our foe away from the exit.

As I watched them engage in a sword fight, I inched my way silently to the exit, but as I reached the path leading to daylight I could not bring myself to follow it. I had seen Albray fight before; I knew how good he was, but Molier was fighting like a demon possessed.

Locking swords with my knight, Molier cast him backwards, clean off his feet, and then turned to address me. ‘Where do you think you are going, princess? Mmm?’

The monstrous-looking knight took to the air to pursue me and, with little choice, I turned and ran for my life, doubtful of my ability to outrun him. I glanced back to see Albray spring at Molier from behind and, grabbing Molier’s cloak, he managed to hoist him backwards.

‘Ladies of the Elohim,’ Albray cried out, ‘grant me the miracle I require to save your daughter from this creature’s desire and in return I shall serve ye in death as well as I have in life!’

‘No,’ I protested, but a strong updraft erupted from within the still chamber below, preventing me from descending back into it.

‘Hurry, Lillet. The sunlight!’ Devere screamed out to me.

I ran for the gateway, and noted how dim the sunlight was becoming, when I heard the loud, strange sound of buckling metal.

Behind me, Molier howled in desperation and as I reached the entrance I heard a death blow dealt and the gurgling sound of a man choking on his

own blood.

The very instant my feet landed on the dirt of the desert terrain beyond the gate, a thick sandstorm caused by a sirocco passed over the sun, and with a loud crash of metal the gateway reconstituted in a flash of light into a solid metal barrier, trapping Molier and Devere within.

‘Oh, dear heavens.’ I was sickened by the account of my knight’s death. ‘Albray’s vow to the goddesses explains why he answered Ashlee’s summons to the stone and why he continues to honour that vow and aid me.’ Now that I better understood Albray’s plight and devotion to our cause, I was saddened, for he had no choice in the matter.

‘Mia, Albray would aid you whether or not he was obliged to,’ Lillet enlightened me, as she ran a hand down my upper arm in a comforting, sincere gesture. ‘He has fallen deeply in love with you, and has confessed as much to me. So, don’t make the same mistake I did and forsake true love for the sake of mortal reasoning...until you know all about life you cannot judge any situation. You can only learn from it. Unconditional human love is the greatest mystery and gift of the divine. If only I had possessed the capacity to understand, trust and care for another more than myself, Albray may have survived Mt Serâbit. I strongly suspect that our love for each other may have enabled us to overcome our foe, and my true destiny—to join with Albray for life and bear his children—may have been fulfilled. But without compassion, there can be no love and thus, no wisdom...this is the basis of the sacred trinity, the all-encompassing force of the universe. Had I come to understand this in life, I could have reached my fullest potential, and I would have been a far more constructive force for the divine in the world. But as it was...I failed my god, my foremothers and my one true love to live a long, lonely life of regret.’

‘Lillet, I’m so sorry.’ I really felt for her. Normally I would have felt threatened and jealous of my lover’s ex-love, but here I was, filled with the very quality that it had been Lillet’s life lesson to learn—compassion. ‘You are too hard on yourself—’

She shook her head and would not hear any consolation. ‘I failed so many tests. My only comfort is that my desire to counter my shortcomings keeps me here on the astral plane, where it is possible for us to make contact. Since death, I have only wished to pass on my knowledge and

experience to another daughter of the blood, in the hope it might be of some use to her. You are the first daughter to face my quest who possesses the ability of astral projection as well,' she concluded.

'Astral projection was not one of Ashlee's talents,' I realised, and for a moment I felt honoured and elated. I wanted to make Lillet feel as empowered as I suddenly did. 'You realise that the very quality you claim to have lacked in life is the quality you now possess precisely *because* you are advising me? For without such compassion, no woman could advise another on how to steal her beloved away from her.'

'I want Albray freed from that accursed vow he made to save my life.' Lillet was not ready to accept any credit. 'He deserves the love I denied him, because I could not see beyond my earthly beliefs to accept what I truly felt.'

'Can love free Albray from the vow he made to the female Elohim?' I queried, eager to help Albray —especially considering how badly I had treated him at our last meeting.

'I don't know,' Lillet conceded, desperate. 'During my life I studied every Egyptian mythological and occult text I could lay my hands on, trying to find a way to break Albray's self-imposed curse. Apparently it was unprecedented, as I came up with nothing. But perhaps, in your modern technological world, you might have more success in finding a solution.'

'Say no more.' I assured her that I would think of something. 'Thank you for setting me straight, Lillet.' The priestess had done me a huge favour and I really felt I owed her the same. 'It seems that I too have been a fool, but I promise you,' I placed my right hand on hers and my left over my heart, 'I shall do everything within my power to save our knight, just as he has saved us, the daughters of Isis, time and time again. Do you know where Albray is now?' I felt the first thing I needed to do was to find him and apologise.

'This realm is infinite, so finding him when he does not want to be found might prove a little difficult.' Lillet shrugged. 'It would be your will versus his, and Albray's will is as strong as ever it was, I'm afraid.'

'I can use the stone to find him. Albray can't ignore that!' I resolved. There was only one problem, however. 'I can't summon him to my service through the stone if I am asleep.'

‘Beware of Molier,’ Lillet warned. ‘He still possesses knowledge that I never did discover.’ The priestess kissed my cheek and then smiled to wish me well. ‘Awake now.’

LESSON 20

ABANDONMENT

As I returned to consciousness, I became aware of being cold and uneasy before I'd opened my eyes.

When my eyelids did part, I was so startled by an oppressive white mist floating over my bed that I didn't notice my charm being drawn from its hiding place and into the apparition. I realised the purpose of the phenomenon too late, and though I grabbed to retrieve my treasured item, the mist quickly withdrew under my tent flap, taking the stone with it. 'NO!' I scampered off the bed, across the floor and under the exit flap after my treasure—without it, I'd never see Albray again!

The mist rose high above my grasp and, gathering its sparse substance to itself, it increased in density and transformed into a black bird which flew away over the ruins.

'Molier.' I recognised this bird from Ashlee's safebreaking incident. 'Goddamn it!' I ran up the road that led to the ruins. I wasn't going to let anyone take Albray away, not even a shape-shifting, death-defying abomination! I did not consider the danger to my own person, or how ludicrous it was that I would risk my neck for a ghost!

The black bird flew past the ruins and over the embankment on the other side, and across another plateau.

The sharp rocks were cutting my feet to pieces, but I couldn't feel the pain of my flesh for the pain in my heart, nor could I see where the hell I was going. The moon hung low on the horizon, shedding light on the bird, but casting shadows over the mountainous landscape.

Then my perception of events slipped into slow motion. The bird let go of the charm. I raced toward the dark, shadowy area where my treasure was sure to land, and as I entered the shadows I felt the ground drop out from beneath me.

Have you seen the cliffs on the far side of this mountain? I recalled Akbar asking. *There is no recovering a body that has fallen down there.*

My heart was gripped by fear. I looked down into the great, vast depths of a chasm and then my body jerked to a halt as my shirt was caught up behind me and my body crashed against the jagged rock wall.

‘I have you, Dr Montrose.’

I knew that voice. ‘Akbar?’ I could feel the stitching of my shirt giving way. ‘I’m slip—’

I was abruptly jerked upwards, where a strong arm gripped my waist and I was swung back around to stand on solid ground.

‘Oh, my god!’ I gaped at the abyss I’d nearly fallen into and hugged tight my saviour to thank him and reassure myself that I was now safe.

‘What possessed you, lady?’ Akbar pried me off to look me in the eye.

I looked back into the chasm, realising that there would be no retrieving Albray’s stone and just burst into tears.

‘You are traumatised.’ Akbar excused my emotional outburst and without further ado he carried me all the way back to camp.

In my tent I sat on the side of my bed and cried uncontrollably, not entirely sure if it was the loss of my guide or the near loss of my own life that scared me more. At least if I had died I would finally have joined my knight. I *should have been wearing the stone*, I scolded myself. Had I not doubted Albray, I would have had no cause *not* to wear it. He had warned me that Molier was trying to undermine my trust in my guardian, and it seemed that Molier’s tactic had worked. I couldn’t even confront Molier over what had taken place; I would look and sound like a complete lunatic, for I had no proof of his treachery. Now I had lost an irreplaceable family heirloom...but was it irreplaceable? My tears finally ebbed, for I realised that I knew the summons that Ashlee had used. All I need do was find the same kind of ringed stone required for the summons.

Akbar returned to my tent after a short absence, with a bucket of water and a cloth.

‘What is that for?’ I asked, as my sensibilities were still somewhat scattered.

The Arab placed the bucket beside me and knelt down. ‘Your feet, lady.’ I realised what a bloody toll my misadventure had had on my person when he took up my left foot.

I suppressed a groan as my injuries were washed clean of blood, dirt and gravel; I really hadn't felt the pain of my injuries until now. To take my mind off my woes, I focused my consciousness into my third eye in the hope of glimpsing Akbar's aura. I had to suppress a gasp when I perceived a goldenred hue emanating from his subtle body with its light centres whirling with bright light—he was definitely one of the good guys.

'You are most fortunate to have escaped so lightly.' Akbar tried not to sound as if he was lecturing. 'These few scratches and bruises will heal.' He was gentle with his first aid, but I felt awkward and not a little honoured that this man would bathe my feet.

'I praise the goddess for your vigilance, Akbar,' I placed a hand on his shoulder to distract him from his task, 'but is it not against your customs to bathe the feet of a woman?'

'You are not just any woman.' He continued his service, but said no more due to his suspicions about surveillance in Molier's camp.

His words made me rather curious about something. 'Have you ever heard of Lilith del Aquae, who was reportedly murdered by a group of assassins known as the Melchi during the time of the first crusade?'

'Never.' He stopped what he was doing to place a finger to his lips, reminding me it was not safe to speak openly. 'Can you walk? You might fancy something to eat, perhaps?'

'Ah...sure.' I slipped my feet into my scuffs and, treading timidly at first, I accompanied Akbar outside.

The man would not say anything until we were well clear of Molier's dwelling in particular, which he eyed with mistrust. We strolled down the centre of the dirt road that ran through our camp.

'My order has the greatest respect for the daughters of the blood,' Akbar said in a whisper. 'I assure you that Lilith del Aquae was not murdered by my people.'

'Your people?' I queried as if I was surprised to learn this. 'Do you mean to say that you belong to the same order of assassins as are mentioned in the legend?'

He gave a slight nod in confession. 'It is true that the Melchi tried to stop Lilith del Aquae's party from leaving the Sinai. My predecessors appealed to the priestess to return the keys to safekeeping within the mountain, where they had been since the time of the Exodus when this site

was abandoned for greener pastures. When it became obvious that the Lady del Aquae was inclined to honour our request, she was killed by the knights in her company as a traitor, and although my order fought to avenge her murder and obtain the stolen keys, one knight escaped our grasp. After that, my brotherhood had some of our highest initiates penetrate the ranks of the knights of Sion to protect the daughters of Isis who lived on the Continent.'

I had forgotten that lower France and Spain were once in the possession of the Moorish peoples, and this might have been why they had fought so hard to retain the kingdoms where the descendants of their royal bloodlines now lived. Albray could have been one such knight and the Grand Master of the Order of Sion probably would have been aware of this. Which would explain why Marie de Saint-Clair sent Albray to lead Lillet to the site in the Sinai, and why he could claim to know the way to their obscure destination!

Albray couldn't possibly have been part of Sion's first expedition to the site. He hadn't even been born at the time. What's more, there was no evidence to suggest that the Order of Sion had revisited the site between that time and Molier's expedition. While Lillet's order had possession of the keys, Sion would have no cause to revisit the remote Mt Serâbit. So, how had Albray known the way to the Star-Fire Temple of the Elohim goddesses? Why had he been so influential with the Melchi assassins during Lillet's debacle? He had been able to persuade them to assist his quest. Was it just the promise that he could deliver the keys back to their rightful resting place? 'So your order has kept a history of all the comings and goings to this site in the past?' I raised this topic with Akbar, to see what he could tell me of Albray.

'I assure you that if we had murdered the priestess, the Melchi would have secured possession of the keys.' He avoided my question, or perhaps he thought I was inquiring about the accuracy of his version of events.

'But you have had limited success in keeping the keys secure within the mountain.' I hinted at the other occasions the vials had passed in and out of the site.

'It is true that the keys have slipped through our defences more than once,' he confessed.

'Lord Hereford, for example?' I wondered how the explorer had managed to avoid being confronted by the Melchi.

Akbar seemed embarrassed by my question. ‘After arranging for his excavation permit to be revoked, we believed he had no chance of opening the gateway. By the time word got back to us that he had, at the last minute, succeeded, it was too late. My people did manage to track him down. He swore he had not taken anything from the temple. He claimed a strange entity had scared both he and his wife from the mount.’

‘But why did he lie? Because it relieved him of the burden of hiding the treasure from all who were pursuing it?’ This seemed odd to me. ‘I suppose, by that time, and with Molier on the loose, the lord could trust no one with his secret.’

‘But my order will not repeat the mistakes of the past,’ Akbar stated in a determined fashion. ‘When you open the mount this time, my assignment is to remove the vials and take them to a safer hiding place away from the Ark.’

I nearly had a heart attack.

‘Wait a second! You *want* me to open the gateway?’ I stopped dead in my tracks. ‘I assumed you were here to dissuade me from such a course of action.’

‘I have never tried to discourage you, not since you showed me the mark of Isis,’ he replied, rather stunned that I assumed he would thwart my efforts.

He was right. It was Albray who had been discouraging me. All Akbar had done was express a desire for Molier’s demise.

‘You *must* open the gateway. The Ark is your best hope of destroying the beast that is the curse of this place.’

‘Molier.’ I was less confident than ever about my capacity to fight such a formidable foe, but I didn’t wish to alarm Akbar by saying so, or ask him how he expected me to destroy such a beast. ‘Does your order recall the first time Molier visited this site?’ I resumed my slow steps toward the mess tent.

Akbar nodded and then warned me: ‘He has prolonged his life at great cost—he has become a nocturnal creature. He has not seen dawn, dusk, or the light of day in a little under eight hundred years.’ He looked me in the eye, probably expecting me to laugh in his face—which I did not.

‘Molier was entombed in the mount by one of the Melchi agents who infiltrated the Order of Sion...’ I raised both eyebrows to fish for

confirmation of what I already suspected.

‘His father was a knight of the crusades belonging to the Scottish order of the—’

‘Sangrèal knighthood,’ I concluded, which explained Albray’s claim to be a Scot, despite his dark colouring and lack of an accent. ‘But his mother?’

‘She was a priestess of our sister order and a princess of Isis, who was given to the visiting Lord de Vere for a short time in order to produce a prince of the blood.’ Akbar did not hesitate to give me an answer, though he was obviously stunned by how much I knew.

I recalled reading that some of the secret knighthoods in the Holy Land had had secret dealings with the local assassins—even been trained by them—despite disagreements over who should protect valuable ancient relics. Perhaps breeding super-beings had been part of the equation?

‘This prince was known among the Sion order as Albray Devere,’ Akbar continued. ‘To we Melchi, he was Albe-Ra, the Shining One. He died trapping the beast, Molier, in the mountain. He was defending a daughter of the blood with whom he had fallen in love—’

‘Lillet du Lac.’ I smiled as I beat Akbar to the punchline. I was deeply moved to finally discover something of my dream lover’s illustrious history. No wonder Albray had not wished to speak about his past—how could he without sounding like he was blowing his own trumpet...or lying through his teeth.

‘You are well informed for a woman of the west.’ Akbar probably didn’t mean to sound condescending.

‘I study.’ I shrugged, not wishing to stray from my pursuit of answers. ‘During the incident of which you speak, involving Lillet, Molier reportedly claimed he alone possessed knowledge regarding activation of the Ark. He alleged he would not perish as had other men before him. Do you know what knowledge he referred to?’

‘Maybe he knows about the breastplate,’ Akbar mused.

‘Breastplate?’ I pushed for more information.

‘Of the daughters of Isis,’ my Arab friend prompted, but when I indicated my ignorance, he enlightened me. ‘The story of the Lady del Aquae tells that when the two vials were positioned in the door to the Ark chamber, they produced a breastplate of gold, along with an inscription

which stated that the golden plate must be worn when approaching the Ark. The wearer of the breastplate was also warned that shoes must be removed, and feet washed, when the wearer entered the presence of the Ark, “that they die not”.’

‘Good to know,’ I commented with a gulp and Akbar nodded in agreement. ‘There always seems to be a loophole for the villain to negotiate when it comes to this saving-the-world business.’

‘The gods know that human beings must be granted freedom of choice,’ Akbar explained. ‘The whole process of evolution is redundant if there is no choice, no cause and effect, no lessons to be learned.’

I forced a smile to concede his point. ‘So what would happen if Molier got his hands on this breastplate?’

‘It is written that the power of the Ark is deadly...the men who accompanied the Lady del Aquae into its presence—ignoring the Priestess’ express warning—were reportedly killed by the fire that leapt from the Ark in bolts as thin as threads.’

‘Nice.’

‘It is also written that if the breastplate is worn by someone of evil intent, or not of the blood,’ Akbar continued, ‘it will give them protection. He, or she, could direct the fury of the gods to be unleashed upon the world. But this is speculation only, as such a circumstance has never come to pass.’

‘But do we really know that Molier is *evil*?’ I asked. ‘True, he stole the Fire vial from the mount and used the sacred substance to sustain himself indefinitely, but that could have been due to normal human survival instincts. He did kill Albray, but in those times any warrior would not have hesitated to do the same to achieve his goals. Has Molier actually done anything that could be considered truly evil?’ On the quiet I reflected that he had also kidnapped the Lady Susan, but he had not harmed her. Most recently, he had stolen my charm, nearly leading me over a cliff in the process. And yet here I was? Did Molier know Akbar was watching out for me? He must have, as he needed me to open the gate and would surely not want me dead at this stage.

‘My brotherhood understands that “evil” refers to any displaced or disorganised energy that has come adrift from its normal time zone,’ Akbar informed me. ‘There are cosmic laws which function here on earth in any given period of history. Undesirable and unharmonious force fields are built

up by the stressed energies of those who operate outside the wavebands of cosmic law. The soul-mind who attempts to sidestep their own time-zone frequency without divine blessing is electing to run counter to the cosmic order, and abandons temporarily the ways of light and love to pursue the path of chaos. When such an imbalance occurs, the gods send forth a counterbalance of extreme good to combat the misplaced energy or entity and send them back to the matrix. In some instances this counterbalance might be a person with particular skills and knowledge.’ Akbar smiled as he said this, and indicated me. ‘In other instances the counterbalance could assume the form of a tragic event that will trigger a great outpouring of human compassion, or a miraculous occurrence to stimulate inspired thought in the masses.’

I had to refrain from gulping in fright and longed for Albray to be by my side; I felt stripped of my greatest weapon without Albray. I needed to find myself a ringed stone and fast! Andre would return with the shipment of white powder today, but with any luck he might arrive late in the day so that the grand opening of the temple would have to wait until the sun was at its zenith tomorrow. That would give me one more day to finish Ashlee’s account, and to find myself a new treasure stone and complete the summons to get my dearest ally to return.

‘Molier’s consumption of the Fire-Stone, when he lacks the Gene of Isis to transmute its divine benediction, has driven him quite mad, I believe,’ Akbar said. ‘I can’t claim to know his reasoning or true purpose for wanting to gain access to the Ark. Perhaps he aspires to true godhood, who knows?’

According to Lillet’s account, the moment Molier had swallowed the Fire-Stone he had felt himself to be a god, so why should he need to pursue it any further? Unless he now fancied keeping the company of the gods in their realm? I was still theorising when we finally reached the mess tent. Even though the sun barely tainted the darkness with the first signs of dawn, our camp chef was up and preparing food.

‘In any case, Molier’s intentions are of no concern. We must thwart him,’ Akbar insisted, and again it was a struggle not to appear daunted.

‘Then I had better eat up, stock up and get back to my tent,’ I replied, forcing myself to sound enthusiastic. ‘I still have much work to do.’

I had to admit that I did feel better for having food in my belly; my nerves had settled down. My date with destiny was fast approaching and being afraid was not going to make it go away.

Apart from reading the rest of Ashlee's journal and seeking a new charm, I had also vowed to Lillet to try and find a way to release Albray from his vow to the Elohim Council of Hathor.

'Now don't stress out,' I cautioned myself, despite the workload that had suddenly piled up. 'I can do this. I just need to tackle one challenge at a time. Ashlee...' I decided to get the journal out of the way—with a little luck, that would leave me the rest of the day to complete my other objectives.

I pulled the large journal from my bag and placed it on the desk before me. I found my place and began to read.

FROM THE HONEYMOON JOURNAL OF LADY SUSAN DEVERE

I insisted on waiting for Ashlee on the dock at Ostia—I would not go anywhere without first warning her of my concerns about Molier. I suspected that he, too, was a powerful psychic, and that when he had abducted and imprisoned me he had probed my mind for information about my dear sister-in-law. I personally had found his presence very unnerving and, whatever his intention toward Ashlee, I knew deep in my gut that his purpose was malign.

My stubbornness dismayed my husband and Cingar, who both insisted that I would do well to stick with the plan and board my transport home. The ship would be departing port in but a few hours.

My wait proved to be of no avail, as when Ashlee and her husband disembarked from Molier's ship they were in such a hurry to get to their own vessel that they would not listen to what I had to say.

'I am so sorry, Susan,' Ashlee said, already on board the rowboat that would take her to her ship. 'We have no time to waste. Cingar will show you to your transport,' she advised once again, while Mr Devere had untied the rowboat.

'You are not leaving without me,' Cingar insisted, jumping aboard before my brother-in-law could push off.

‘Don’t be ludicrous, Cingar!’ Ashlee was annoyed at him. ‘Jessenia is awaiting you on shore. What will your new wife think when you don’t show?’

‘She knows of my decision to accompany you all the way to the East,’ Cingar argued.

‘But who shall see my kin to their boat?’

‘I am not entirely useless,’ Lord Devere said. ‘We are capable of seeing ourselves to the vessel.’

‘There you have it.’ Cingar took a seat, not to be moved, and my sister-in-law did not waste time arguing.

‘Then let us depart.’ She gave Devere the nod to push off and waved to me. ‘I’ll see you in Europe soon, I promise.’

Dutifully, I accompanied my husband to our ship, but inside I felt I was letting our kin down. ‘So, that is that, the adventure is over.’ I spoke my mind, no longer able to bite my tongue.

‘Well, that is hardly something to be disappointed about.’ My lord seemed surprised by my melancholy. ‘I had rather thought you might be relieved.’

‘I would have thought so too.’ I saw his point and could not explain my contrary feelings. ‘But...must we return home? Could we not see the quest through to its end?’

‘My dear Lady Devere,’ my husband was now sounding a little annoyed, ‘have you forgotten that we do have responsibilities to our shire and to the queen?’

‘Yes, of course.’ I forced a smile. ‘How silly of me.’ I had no chance of competing with my lord’s duties and thus I resigned myself to our lot, which I had happily agreed to when I had married Lord Devere.

‘I’m sorry, my love.’ My husband could clearly see my discontent. ‘You know I will always grant you anything that it is within my power to give, but by the time we return we will have already extended our honeymoon, and—’

‘I know,’ I interrupted, heartened that he cared about my feelings. ‘Our sister is in good hands with your brother and Cingar,’ I reasoned. ‘I’m sure they can handle any problems that might arise better than I.’

My lord smiled and kissed my hand, thankful for my understanding and support, and I was glad to give it.

‘My Lord and Lady Devere?’ A man’s voice addressed us from the shadows of the darkened dock-front buildings.

‘Who wishes to know?’ My husband swept me behind himself as he turned to seek our stalker.

An older gentleman came forward onto the dockside, holding a lantern high so that we might see his face. ‘My name is Lord Edward Malory.’

My husband frowned in recognition. ‘I know you. You were an associate of my father’s.’

The gentleman nodded in confirmation.

‘And of my brother,’ Lord Devere added, rather more suspiciously.

‘Yes, I believe we had the pleasure of meeting at your wedding, Lord Oxford.’ The gentleman ventured closer, but my husband did not make a move. He remained in front of me and on his guard.

‘What on earth are you doing here in Ostia, Lord Malory?’ my lord asked, although I felt he already knew what the answer would be.

‘I have been pursuing your brother, Mr Earnest Devere, and his new wife. I have urgent and grave news to deliver. Do you know where I might find them?’ The lord stopped a few feet from us, closely examining my husband’s expression.

‘I cannot help you, I’m afraid. My brother and I have had a falling out and have parted ways,’ Lord Devere answered without hesitation. ‘He did not say where he was bound. And as I am due to catch a ship back to France, I’m afraid you must excuse us. Good day.’ My lord grabbed my hand and began to lead me up the dock, but we suddenly found ourselves confronted by a row of men.

‘I am sorry to have to delay your voyage home, my Lord Devere,’ Lord Malory approached us once more, as his men closed in around us, ‘but I believe my urgency is greater than yours.’

‘Here we go again,’ my husband muttered to me, clearly fed up with the affairs of secret societies.

I must admit that while I was a little apprehensive of this turn of events, inside I was smiling, as it seemed our adventure was not over yet.

FROM THE TRAVEL JOURNALS OF MRS ASHLEE DEVERE

Once Cingar, Devere and I were safely aboard our vessel and bound for our next destination—Napoli, only a day or so away—I beseeched Albray and my husband to enlighten me about the ladies of the Elohim Council, from whom I had drawn the power to repel Molier.

As a daughter of the Blood, you will, upon your death, automatically become a member of this council, albeit a junior one. You'll join the like of Isis, Lilith, Neith, Sarai, Hatshepsut, Nefertiti, Mary Magdalene and the princess-priestesses of her line, and many others whose bloodline descends from the Great Mother, Hathor. For, whatever the dilution... Albray looked from me to my husband and back again ...the blood of the gods runs through your veins. In short, you have the Gene of Isis in your atomic structure.

‘Does your priestess abide among the esteemed members of this council?’ I wondered, as Albray had mentioned his beloved was of my line. I wish I had stopped to think, for the mention of his lost love was clearly distressing.

No, he said quietly. She has elected to remain in the sub-planes of the astral realm, closer to the physical world, for she has unfinished business in the land of the living.

‘Much like you, Albray,’ I noted.

Very much like me, he concurred solemnly.

‘So you have seen her since death?’ Damn my curiosity, but the occult subject matter was so fascinating!

I only make contact when some event arises that involves both of us. It is painful for us, you understand. He was letting me know he was reluctant to discuss it any further.

‘We understand, Albray.’ Devere excused him from saying any more. When I looked at my husband to reprimand him for his interference, he reprimanded me instead. ‘I used to think it was just me you tortured, but now I see that you know how to torture every man in your life.’

I gaped at my accuser, then conceded his point.

I turned back to Albray. ‘My apologies for any anguish I might have caused you...you were saying about the council?’

Ah yes... my knight was clearly pleased by the change in subject, but had to take a moment to recall where he was up to in his tutorial. Your foremothers will aid and protect you during any quest you undertake on

their behalf, Albray explained. There is also a council of male Elohim who aid the sons of the blood. Their council is not accessed via the site in the Sinai, however, but through the other Ark, the one removed from the Holy Land during the first crusade and hidden on the Continent by St Bernard's Children of Solomon—a Masonic brotherhood in France.

‘The other Ark?’ Both Devere and myself picked up on the knight’s choice of words.

‘Are you saying there was more than one Ark of the Covenant?’ I asked, fascinated by this turn in Albray’s tale.

Albray nodded.

‘And that the Ark of the ladies of the Elohim is still housed at the site in the Sinai?’

That is what I believe, yes, Albray confirmed. But I, personally, have never seen it, neither has any man living who has not had a death wish.

‘So why should it be a concern that Molier might gain access to this treasure if it will surely kill him?’ I wondered.

Molier is no longer just a man, nor is he a god. He is not counted among the living, but is one of the undead. He exists outside cosmic law in a chaotic state of his own making. He believes he knows of a way to gain access to the Ark without risking total obliteration, and I shall not hazard him the opportunity to be proven right.

Satisfied with this explanation for the time being, and not wanting to enter into another mystery entirely, I thanked Albray and dismissed him. I had decided to confide in my husband about a few things I had been keeping secret and I was not sure Albray would approve of my course of action.

‘This is the memoir of Lord and Lady Hereford.’ I produced the huge volume from my travel bag and dumped it in Devere’s lap. ‘Unfortunately, I have not had a chance to read very much of it during the course of this journey, but I believe it could contain relevant information concerning our final destination in the Sinai.’

Devere was delighted and opened the book to peruse the contents, but was distracted from the text when he noticed me undressing. ‘What is on your mind, Mrs Devere?’ He smiled, misinterpreting my intent.

‘You wanted to know all my secrets.’ I removed my shirt and turned my back on him, so that he might undo my corset. ‘If you would be so

kind.'

He obliged me, a little puzzled to note the extra padding of the corset, and was smiling broadly when I removed it to expose my fully naked torso. My husband reached out to caress my breasts, which had not been exposed to him since our nights of passion at the Chateau de Vere. During our encounter at the gypsy camp, we'd been in too much of a hurry to bother fully undressing. 'Not so fast,' I teased, as I turned the corset upside down and shook the hidden contents onto the bed.

As the gold coins and precious stones cascaded onto our bunk, Devere's jaw dropped. 'Where on earth...?'

'This was my personal insurance policy from Lord Hereford,' I confessed. 'I knew that if I declared this gift to you when we married then it automatically belonged to you. Well,' I summed up, 'now it does.'

Devere was lost for words.

'There you have it.' I pulled on my shirt and sat on the bed beside him. 'All my secrets.' Except for the one that I carried inside me, but at this early stage of my pregnancy most women could claim blissful ignorance.

'There is a small fortune here.' Devere fingered the jewels, and the coins in different currencies.

'Certainly enough to get us to the Sinai and back again,' I proffered.

'Several times over.' He gathered the treasure and returned it to the pockets inside the corset. 'I cannot claim it. Hereford gave this to you and so it shall remain yours.'

'But, legally, I was wrong to keep it from you,' I protested.

'Then you keep it safe for us.' He handed me back the fully loaded corset. 'If we need it, I'll let you know.'

'No, I cannot let you squander your inheritance on this mission any longer,' I insisted. 'This is my quest and I shall pay.'

'I promised you extensive travel.' Devere was just as insistent. 'I intend to keep my word.'

His resolute manner melted my heart. 'I do love you, Mr Devere.' I slid closer to him.

'And I love you, Mrs Devere.' He kissed me tenderly and placed the corset aside to take advantage of my semi-naked state. Making love on a ship suited us perfectly, for almost everything was nailed down and so less chance of breakage.

FROM THE HONEYMOON JOURNAL OF LADY SUSAN DEVERE

Five days after departing the port of Ostia, Lord Devere and I found ourselves off the coast of Malta.

You see, Lord Malory already suspected that our in-laws were headed toward the Sinai. He had decreed that we would all make the journey if my husband and I were not prepared to be forthcoming with information about our kin's preferred route and hidden agenda.

We may have been the captives of Lord Malory, but we were treated as honoured guests and the vessel was even more luxurious than Molier's. There was obviously a lot of money being channelled into these secret brotherhoods, for their great fortune was clearly reflected in their assets.

Lord Malory visited us in our cabin's lounge, just as he had when we'd passed by every other major port along our route to the East. He came to tempt us with the prospect of disembarking at this port and seeking transport back to our homeland if we were prepared to tell all.

'How many times do I have to tell you? I have no interest whatsoever in my brother's occult pursuits,' my husband insisted, keeping to his story, and for all I knew he wasn't lying. 'Thus, I had precious little reason to inquire after his travel arrangements.'

We had had this conversation quite a few times now.

Malory said that one reason he was so eager to find our sister-in-law was to inform her that her father had taken ill. The Scottish lord also said that he suspected Ashlee could be in danger from what he described as 'an abomination of nature'. I could only presume the lord was referring to the unearthly personality of Christian Molier and my guess had been confirmed with a nod. My husband then demanded to know why Malory had not waited for Molier to return to Ostia, where Lord Malory's private army could have vanquished the threat to our sister before Molier got anywhere near her.

But Lord Malory, who had admitted to being the Grand Master of the brotherhood to which Mr Devere belonged, did not want to prevent our sister and Molier from meeting in the Sinai. The Grand Master was well aware of Ashlee's miraculous talents and her activities over the years, having been kept well informed by my father, Lord Eric Cavandish, and my

aunt, Lady Charlotte, the Dowager Countess of Derby. Malory's task was to prepare Ashlee for the confrontation. His brotherhood believed that Ashlee's powerful and pure psychic talent could only have been sent into the world to oppose an equally powerful impure force which had been set free in the world at roughly the same time as her birth.

Lord Hamilton, who had also been a member of the secret brotherhood, had confessed to his Grand Master that he had inadvertently released an ancient, and seemingly malevolent, creature from an underground chamber on Mt Serâbit. Lord Malory believed that the creature had assumed the identity of Christian Molier.

'What are you saying? Molier is an evil spirit?' My husband and I struggled to accept the credibility of the lord's claim.

'No, we believe he is what might be termed undead.' We were corrected and, quite frankly, left twice as disbelieving.

Needless to say, my husband was not impressed by the description. 'This is starting to sound like a bad vampire novel.'

Malory informed us that Mt Serâbit had a long and illustrious history. All the secret knightships that had proliferated around the time of the first crusade into the Holy Land believed the mount contained many unearthly treasures capable of being used to perform great feats of good or evil.

Malory explained that he suspected Lord Hereford had taken one such treasure, although Hamilton would never admit to it. Our captor also suspected that, before the Viscount of Herefordshire had died, he'd entrusted this treasure to my sister-in-law's safekeeping. This was why Molier was so keen to find our kinswoman; at least, that was Lord Malory's theory.

I put two and two together to conclude that Malory was the man Ashlee had accused of murdering Lord Hamilton and so I found his story a little too convenient. 'Lord Hereford may have given such a treasure to our sister-in-law before he was disposed of by your colleagues, don't you mean?' I said boldly, and Malory seemed genuinely stunned by my accusation.

'Lord Hereford died of natural causes, I assure you, Lady Devere,' he defended. 'I'll admit that I was aware of Lord Hereford's death before the fact, for it was your aunt, Lady Charlotte, who prophesied that Miss Granville would marry Mr Devere, and that there would be an obstruction

to the union which would resolve itself. I tried to warn Hereford of this, but he wouldn't listen. Is it that meeting that gave you reason to suspect my order's involvement?'

'Don't answer that,' my husband intervened. 'Whatever the truth behind Lord Hereford's demise, it is my belief that you secret society fanatics are as certifiable and obsessed as each other!' Lord Devere stated his belief in no uncertain terms.

For myself, I didn't know what to think. Ashlee had never mentioned any such treasure to me, yet I had to admit that her psychic powers had increased since Lord Hamilton's death, as had her ambition to travel to the East.

Having been insulted for the umpteenth time by my Lord Devere, Lord Malory withdrew from our chambers, taking his offer of release with him.

In less than a week our vessel would reach Alexandria, from where, Lord Malory thought, our in-laws would commence their overland journey to the Sinai. It was our captor's hope to find our kin in this city. Then, perhaps we would all learn the truth behind this mystery.

FROM THE TRAVEL JOURNALS OF MRS ASHLEE DEVERE

Two and a half weeks after leaving Ostia we reached the ancient land of Egypt and were nearing the fallen city of Alexandria. We crossed paths with many outward-bound vessels. We proceeded by the fleet of the Pasha anchored under the walls of the seraglio, and negotiated our way through the difficult and dangerous reef-ridden channel to anchor in the harbour.

Mariners were usually guided through the reefs by a local, but Captain Falco was not prepared to let any locals board our vessel, because at the port of Malta there had been reports of a plague in Alexandria. Captain Falco was here to drop us off and then leave; he would not risk his crew.

'There is plague in the city?' Thankfully, this was the first my husband had heard of the rumour, or he might have paid the captain to take us elsewhere.

'In the Frankish quarter of the city it is not much of a concern, apparently, nor in the desert. It is just the poorer parts of town that one need worry about,' the captain assured us.

'So much history,' I uttered, transfixed by the allure of the ancient city.

I was amazed to see that Pompey's Pillar, a tribute to Egypt's proud history, still stood tall and was one of the most prominent landmarks of the city.

'I can't wait to get in amongst it,' I said with a huge smile.

'Are you not listening?' My husband was very concerned now. 'There is plague in the city!'

'When you travel so far abroad you have to expect to face a few hazards.' I played down the risk.

'Then we will head straight for the Frankish quarter,' Devere stated.

'Agreed.' Anything to get my husband off the boat.

'Agreed,' echoed Cingar, whereby Devere and I both objected.

'You are definitely going home with Captain Falco,' I lectured. 'I shall not be responsible for keeping you from your family any longer.'

'You need me,' he stated plainly. 'Do either of you speak Arabic?'

'I speak a little,' I lied. I could read it, but I wasn't too sure how well I could speak or interpret the local tongue. In truth, what I had heard so far sounded like gibberish.

Cingar gave me a look that implied disbelief, and then spoke a sentence in the local tongue and awaited my response.

I caught a couple of words I recognised and I tried to piece together the overall meaning of what he was saying, but I deliberated too long.

'You won't last five minutes,' Cingar concluded, 'as I just gave you directions to the Frankish quarter.' He smiled to rest his case, but then added: 'Let's not even discuss what will happen when you attempt to arrange provisions for your journey.'

'I feel sure there are translators to be found in the city.' I tried to dismiss the gypsy one last time.

'But none are so well disposed toward you and your safety as I,' he stated sincerely, placing his right hand over his heart.

I clicked my fingers as I remembered. 'Albray speaks Arabic, I'm sure of it.'

'Albray,' queried Cingar. 'Who is Albray?'

'No one worth mentioning,' my husband decreed, making it plain by the look he served me that he did not entirely trust Albray. 'You are a good friend to us, Cingar.' Mr Devere was very grateful to our gypsy friend and

rather fond of his company. 'We humbly accept your fine offer and shall be eternally grateful for your guidance.'

The gypsy smiled broadly. 'Then let us enter Alexandria!'

The dockside streets of the ancient city were a far cry from what they would have been in the glory days of Egypt, although it did feel like we had stepped back thousands of years in time.

Flies swarmed around the masses of dirty, half-naked, sore-eyed Arab men and the donkeys, yelping dogs and camels bustling around the long range of bazaars that lined the way to the Frankish part of town.

We were forced to barge our way through the commotion behind our guide, who seemed to take all the bustle, stench and noise in his stride. For a time I clean forgot that there were such things as obelisks, pyramids and ruined temples; my sole mission was to find some space, and air to breathe. Suddenly, I was a lot more apprehensive about threats of plague and Mr Devere passed me his handkerchief so that I might cover my mouth and nose.

When we eventually cleared the crush, we found ourselves in front of a whole row of fine buildings that were shops stocked with European goods. These were followed by other renovated dwellings dedicated to lodging, business, restaurants for dining and salons for drinking. Amid these were fine country houses, displaying beautiful gardens that grew upon barren sands.

'What an improvement.' I couldn't believe how pompous that statement was, but the Englishwoman in me was completely delighted to find the comforts of home in such an ancient city. 'What should we do first? Find a room? Go shopping?'

'I would see Mr Banks, the English consul,' Cingar suggested. 'You are required to sign the consular book as a record of your arrival and presence in the East.'

'But we don't wish to announce our presence here. What if Molier was to see it?' I posed.

'Molier would see the French consul,' Cingar pointed out, and yet the prospect still made me feel uneasy.

'Perhaps tomorrow, just before we leave,' I suggested. 'What I need right now is a bath.'

The temperature was unbearable and my green velvet attire was not helping.

‘Done,’ Cingar agreed, leading off down the road. ‘As we wish to avoid attention, might I suggest you bypass the more popular hotels and guesthouses of the French, English and Americans. I know an Italian gypsy trader who would be happy to accommodate us. His home is not as grand or prestigious as some, but I guarantee it is more hospitable and comfortable than any in the city.’

As expected, Cingar’s boast did not fall short of expectations. The European part of Alexandria is located in the outlying section of the city and it was in a quiet little back street that we came to the dwelling of Mr Frinkulo Maximoff. Mr Maximoff was a coppersmith by trade and, by fortune, a trader in Middle Eastern exotica to the West. Silks, soaps, statues, spices and scents: his large dwelling was filled with them. The front room of the house was also his store and showroom. Born in Italy, the Maximoffs were gypsies who became too successful to risk displaying their wares and carrying their fortune on the road. They did the unthinkable and quit the nomadic life to settle on the edge of the desert, where they had lived happily and prosperously for over twenty years.

The Maximoffs did adore having guests, however, and as friends of Cingar, we were warmly welcomed, fed and given the best guestroom in the house. A sunken tiled bath had been hand-filled by the staff with warm water and sweet scented oils whilst we ate. Hence, our room was filled with heady fragrances when we were ready to retire and refresh ourselves.

Our balcony overlooked a large garden courtyard, in which many of the herbs, spices and scents sold by Maximoff were cultivated. I gazed across the rooftops toward the burning sands of Egypt, wafts of scented water from our room mingling with the perfume of the garden carried upon the hot breeze, and I felt myself seduced by the pleasurably unfamiliar atmosphere. This would remain with me for the rest of my life. Whenever I remembered the East, I would be swept back to this magical moment. ‘I think I shall adore this city after all,’ I called to Devere, who was preoccupied inside our room.

‘Me too.’

I returned inside to find my husband had already stripped naked and was submerged in the large bath with a cigar in hand.

‘You look very content, in *my* bath.’ I had to chuckle at his speed.

‘There’s plenty of room,’ he grinned.

I decided to indulge his invitation, as I was just as eager to remove my immensely constricting and inappropriate attire. ‘We have to buy some local clothes for the journey,’ I said, tossing aside the green velvet items. Naked below the torso, I walked into the tub toward Devere and then turned and knelt down beside him so he could undo my corset.

‘It doesn’t get any better than this,’ he commented, admiring my behind as I stood to cast off my last item of clothing.

‘Now we don’t want to destroy our host’s lovely home.’ I sank into water all the way over my head, to surface a very invigorated woman. ‘Praise my foremothers, that feels fabulous!’

Devere ran his hand down my wet, oil-scented skin. ‘If we just take it real slow, maybe the damage can be controlled?’

‘Wouldn’t that mean we’d have to divide our attention between the world outside us,’ I slid my way on top of him, ‘and the world inside?’ I lowered myself to sit upon his already eager member.

‘Not at all,’ he grinned confidently. ‘I guarantee my want of you will overcome any obstacle.’ His kiss encouraged me to forget about the consequences and seize the moment.

In fact, we seized the whole afternoon, and evening found us still lounging on the bed, our bedcovers wound around us.

‘Our host must think us awfully rude,’ I raised myself to dress, as I was feeling rather famished, ‘and this is certainly not getting us any closer to the Sinai.’

‘Are you aware that you have a tiny chakra system growing inside your own?’ Devere placed his hand over my lower stomach. ‘Right about here.’

My heart skipped a beat and jumped into my throat—I must have appeared so guilty.

‘When were you planning on telling me?’ he queried calmly, but with a tinge of accusation and hurt.

‘I wanted to be sure.’ My defence was transparent.

‘You expect me to believe you didn’t know?’ Devere saw through me. ‘And you’re a far better psychic than I am.’

‘It is what your brotherhood wanted from this union.’ I decided to be frank. ‘And the truth is, I was doubtful that you would risk your prime goal to allow me to complete my quest.’

‘The ambitions of my order are not the reason I would see you return to England.’ Devere was angered by my assumptions, as deep down I knew he would be. ‘Have you no regard for the life of our child that you would risk its future?’

All I divined from my husband’s words was that he wished me to return home. ‘You are so predictable!’ I hurried dressing. ‘Is it any wonder I don’t confide in you?’

‘You are not running away from *this* argument.’ Devere began dressing himself, just in case he needed to pursue me.

‘And you are *not* taking me back to England!’ I secured the stone’s bracelet around my wrist, grabbed my weapons belt and coat, and made for the door.

‘Please, Ashlee, be reasonable.’ Devere grabbed my arm to delay me.

I glared at him a moment and then stated resolutely, ‘In the name of the goddess, I repel you!’

‘No, Ash,’ Devere appealed as he was drawn to the bed and compelled to lie down. ‘Please don’t forsake me again. Don’t forsake our ch—’

‘I blind you to my being.’ I spoke up before I could be touched by his appeal. Devere’s eyes closed despite his struggle and he immediately fell into a deep sleep. ‘And I banish you from my thoughts and heart until my quest is done,’ I concluded solemnly. ‘May the goddess keep you safe until then...may she keep us all safe.’ I stroked my flat belly, yet to show any trace of my condition, and then opened the door.

‘My dear lady.’

I gasped when I found Cingar standing at my door, dressed in a light Arab cloak with a hood.

‘I have arranged passage on a merchant boat to Cairo, but unfortunately it leaves tonight,’ he informed me.

‘That suits me fine.’ I stepped into the hall to join Cingar and closed the door behind me.

‘Are you not going to wake Devere?’ The gypsy was puzzled by my actions.

‘My husband is not coming with us,’ I announced coldly, making my way downstairs before I had to contend with an argument.

‘Oh, not again!’ the gypsy whined in my husband’s defence.

‘Abandoning your spouse at every given opportunity is no way to run a successful marriage,’ he scolded.

‘Hah, look who’s talking!’ I responded lightly, but the gypsy did not look amused. ‘Are you coming with me, or staying with Mr Devere?’

He gave me a hurt look, surprised I had asked. ‘You know I am always at your service.’

‘Then come aid me to buy an Arab cloak from Mr Maximoff, so that we may be on our way to Cairo.’

Cingar drew a deep, uneasy breath. ‘As you wish, my lady.’ He reluctantly left the door to my room and followed me downstairs.

LESSON 21

FEARS

FROM THE HONEYMOON JOURNAL OF LADY SUSAN DEVERE

We had been anchored three days in the harbour of Alexandria before we witnessed the arrival of our kin. Lord Devere had yet to disclose the name of his brother's vessel to our captor, so it took Malory a bit longer to become aware that Ashlee and Mr Devere were now in the city.

Coming on to evening, my lord and I were loaded into a boat and rowed to shore—after admiring the ancient city from the ship for many days, I was rather curious to take a closer look.

‘The Deveres are at the home of Mr Frinkulo Maximoff for the night,’ Malory's spy informed him. ‘He's a gypsy trader on the far side of Little Europe.’

We had already established that Lord Devere and myself were being taken along on the ambush as leverage, and I had a strong suspicion that our kidnapping was about to turn ugly.

The streets of the city were still a hive of activity; the smells of spicy food and the sound of fevered music, played on exotic instruments, had me quite enchanted. I had a burning desire to get amongst the crowd and enjoy the carnival atmosphere, but had little chance of fulfilling my desire, surrounded by Malory's knights as we were.

I could see why they called the Frankish end of town Little Europe. It was far more developed, staid and civilised.

Our party did not go unnoticed as we passed up the main thoroughfare. An English gentleman crossed the road from a salon to introduce himself to our party as Mr Banks, the English consul in Alexandria. Malory was inwardly annoyed when Mr Banks invited us to sign the consular book.

‘Unfortunately, we have a previous engagement.’ Malory attempted to decline.

‘Come, come, Lord Malory.’ Lord Devere decided to complicate the issue. ‘It won’t take long, and Mr Banks is sure to have vital information regarding our stay in Alexandria.’

‘That I do.’ The gentleman seemed most eager to be our host.

‘Tomorrow morning, perhaps,’ Malory adamantly insisted.

‘I tell you what.’ Lord Devere was not about to pass up the opportunity to give Malory the slip. ‘You go on and Lady Devere and I shall catch you up.’ My husband grinned as he took my arm and guided me out from amid Malory’s men.

‘Splendid.’ Mr Banks motioned us toward his premises just across the road.

Angry at having to split his force, Malory motioned a couple of his men to follow us and had the remaining four knights accompany him on his mission.

We had no sooner entered the consulate than my husband was asking after their bathroom facilities. When one of Malory’s guards tried to accompany him, Lord Devere put him off. ‘I feel sure I am safe in the consulate and do not require your assistance.’

Mr Banks suppressed a smile at the comment.

‘Bodyguards,’ commented my husband to his host. ‘They are a little overzealous at times. Stay,’ my lord had the cheek to order the knight once more. ‘I shan’t be long.’ As I was still under their watchful eye, the guard was embarrassed and remained in the lounge.

Mr Banks had gone to arrange things, and took a little longer than expected to return to the sitting room. When he did, he offered drinks all round and gave no hint that anything was amiss.

Only later did I learn that my husband had explained the situation to our host, and had then slipped out of the house. Mr Banks had provided directions to the back entrance of Mr Maximoff’s home, and also sent one of his house servants to fetch the local authorities.

Once five minutes had elapsed, I was beginning to wonder after my husband’s whereabouts myself, and although I tried to keep my guards distracted with lively conversation, one of them was clearly growing concerned.

‘The spicy food here is certainly a shock to the system,’ he commented to Mr Banks. ‘If you would kindly excuse me.’

Mr Banks was nowhere near as eager to offer up directions this time. 'I'm afraid we've only one bathroom here. Once Lord Devere returns—'

The knight, frustrated, drew his sword, which made Mr Banks, and me, gasp in shock. 'Go and find Lord Devere,' he instructed his accomplice, pointing the tip of his sword in our direction. The consul then reached inside his jacket to produce two pistols, aiming one at each of Malory's knights. 'How about we await the Lord Devere's return?' he said, encouraging the men to relinquish their weapons. I collected them for safekeeping.

In the meantime, Lord Devere had raced to his brother's rescue and arrived at the back entrance to Maximoff's house, just as Malory and his men were approaching the front door.

After managing to scale the back wall in darkness, James nearly bowled over a couple of Arabs as he sped up a pathway in the courtyard. He entered the kitchen appealing desperately for information from the house staff. 'Devere? Devere?'

At first the women shook their heads, alarmed by the intrusion, until James managed to piece together enough Italian to explain that he was here to warn his brother of danger.

The eldest woman looked James over and, able to see the family resemblance and that this man was clearly an English gentleman, she relented. 'Come, I'll show you.'

The servant woman knocked a few times on the guest's door and then opened it when there was no response. She smothered a scream. A dark man leant over the sleeping Devere, and when he looked up his eyes glowed red and yellow like a demon's.

'Get your hands off my brother,' James warned, his fear for his brother's welfare giving him the courage to run at the beast, who had his palms clutched around Earnest's temples. As James came near, the creature growled and shattered into a white mist, which wafted quickly out through the balcony doors.

'Sweet mother of mercy,' the old woman uttered, and crossed herself. James ran and shook his brother.

'Earnest! Wake up!' Slapping around the face didn't elicit any response, so James threw a glass of water over his brother and Earnest came

to with a start. 'Are you all right?'

'James? What are you doing here?' Earnest looked around the room. 'Where is my wife?' As soon as he posed the question, Earnest remembered her departure. 'Oh, no, we have to go!' He clambered off the bed.

'You have no idea.' James aided his brother to throw his belongings into a bag, but as Earnest made toward the door James pulled him back. 'Not that way.'

The sound of several men ascending the stairs in haste caused the brothers to back up toward the balcony.

Malory and his knights entered to find an old woman making the bed. 'Where are Mr and Mrs Devere?'

The housemaid continued with her chore unfazed, as men flooded the room to search it. 'They left some time ago.'

Malory noticed the closed balcony doors and immediately moved to check beyond them. He spied two figures scaling the back wall of the courtyard. 'Out here.' He directed his men over the balcony in pursuit.

'Why are you not back in France?' Earnest demanded some answers from his brother. 'And who are we running from?'

'An old friend of yours is responsible on both counts.' James led his brother down the back streets toward the rear of the English consulate. 'Does the name Lord Malory ring any bells?'

'Lord Malory is here!' Earnest was shocked to a standstill. James ran back and grabbed his brother's arm to drag him back to a sprint. 'But I don't understand...does he wish me harm?' Had the Grand Master got wind of the fact that Mrs Devere had fled her marriage?

'All I know is that he kidnapped Lady Devere and myself in order to get to you.' James ducked into a courtyard and pulling Earnest inside, he closed the gate. 'Lord Malory seems to think that your wife's destiny is to destroy some creature that originated in the Sinai.'

'Molier.' Devere named the said creature under his breath.

'I thought Lord Malory was completely insane and I would still...' James said, wishing it was so, 'had I not seen that demon leaning over you at Maximoff's.'

'You saw him!' Earnest was horrified, and yet excited as his brother nodded gravely. 'But how did Molier find me when my wife has repelled him?'

I blind you to my being. He recalled Ashlee's exact words.

Now that she was no longer in his company, Molier couldn't find Mrs Devere but he could now find her husband. Or the creature could pursue Lady Devere, or anyone that Mrs Devere knew, who might lead the way to her.

'This is very bad,' Earnest realised.

The sound of several pistols being cocked made it painfully clear that the situation had just got worse. But it was not Lord Malory's men, or Molier's, that held them at gunpoint this time. It was the local law enforcement. The Devere brothers were seized and escorted into the consulate.

'Excellent,' James uttered to his brother with a satisfied grin.

Earnest, who was in a hurry to catch his wife, did not agree. 'How do you figure that?'

When my husband and his brother entered the consulate lounge, I ran to embrace my Lord Devere. His captors released him, his identity confirmed by my reaction.

'Praise god you're safe.' I looked from my husband to my brother-in-law, perplexed. 'But where is Ashlee?'

'A good question.' My husband was equally eager to know.

'Halfway to Cairo in all probability,' Mr Devere was most annoyed to concede. 'We had a little disagreement,' he added in further explanation.

'Not another one,' James complained, fed up. 'Haven't you two got the faintest idea of what a marriage commitment actually is?'

With a pat on the arm I urged my husband to settle down. I took Mr Devere aside, whilst James moved to congratulate Mr Banks on apprehending two of the kidnappers. He also wished to clarify any questions the officers of the Pasha might have about Lord Malory and his men.

'What did you argue about?' I sat down with Mr Devere in a quiet corner.

'My wife is pregnant,' he announced solemnly.

'Oh, my god!' My heart nearly stopped with all the joy that flooded it. 'Congratulations!' I made my brother-in-law smile briefly.

‘Thank you.’ He conceded that it was grand news. ‘I thought that it would be wiser to return home to England, rather than risk a mishap in the desert.’ He justified his side of the argument.

‘Oh dear,’ I said, knowing how Ashlee would have taken to the suggestion.

‘I know,’ he scolded himself, feeling that he should have known better. ‘Now she is tackling the quest alone. Well, not alone,’ he corrected himself, rather bitterly. ‘She has Cingar and Albray to aid her.’

‘Albray?’ I frowned.

Devere was wearied by the very mention of the name. ‘You were right in saying that my wife had not taken a lover, that it was more likely to be a male spirit advising her. Mrs Devere trusts him so implicitly that he may as well be her lover.’

‘I doubt very much that a ghost would be able to match your relationship with your wife.’ I suppressed a grin at my boldness in saying so, but at least the comment did manage to raise my brother-in-law’s spirits. ‘We should resume our pursuit of our sister without delay.’ I made to move, when Mr Devere grabbed my arm.

‘We have another problem...’

I sat back down to learn what it was.

‘I believe that Molier can track us to my wife.’

This adventure just got more and more complex. ‘So by trying to assist Ashlee, we might only be placing her in more danger?’

Mr Devere nodded. ‘I need to speak with an authority on spiritual shielding before we pursue her.’

‘Do you know of such an authority here in Alexandria?’ I implored him, just as concerned about Ashlee’s welfare.

‘I need to speak with Lord Malory,’ he replied, as someone knocked on the door of the house.

‘That will be Lord Malory now,’ I informed him cheerily. ‘Come to collect Lord Devere and myself.’

Once Malory and the other men in his company had joined the growing crowd in the English consul’s lounge, Mr Devere, Lord Malory and I joined forces to do a lot of fast talking. We managed to convince the Pasha’s officials that there had been a giant misunderstanding.

My husband looked on in disbelief as Mr Devere insisted he knew about Lord Malory's visit, and I stated that my husband and I had come in pursuit of our relatives of our own free will.

'We did?' My husband cocked an eye in question, wondering what the hell I was up to now.

'It is our sister-in-law who has been kidnapped,' I said, to the shock of everyone present. 'We believe she has been taken to Cairo and so require a speedy passage there.'

'I can arrange that,' Lord Malory said, eager to deal himself into my favour and grateful that I was not exposing him for the kidnapper he was.

'I felt sure of it.' I accepted the deal.

'Is there anything I can do?' Mr Banks offered.

'You could bid us leave with the greatest haste,' I suggested.

The Pasha's official obviously had better things to do than to stand around listening to a bunch of English people talking gibberish. As we all seemed to be getting along, he gave up on even trying to follow our discourse. 'Be gone from my city before daybreak,' he told all the tourists present.

'I shall see to it personally.' A confused Mr Banks gave his assurance as he showed the officials to the door.

'Can someone please explain what just happened?' Lord Devere appealed to his brother and me.

'Mrs Devere has been kidnapped, you say,' Lord Malory cut in. 'Is it true, Earnest?'

'I need to know how I can shield myself from Molier's eyes.' Mr Devere had his own question.

'Has he got her?' Malory had to know first.

'No.' Mr Devere would admit that much. 'Is there a way I can keep Molier at a distance?'

As Lord Malory nodded and began to explain, Lord Devere was compelled to cut in. 'Can we go now?'

'We cannot leave now!' I was surprised that James would leave his brother in Lord Malory's hands and sail off back to England, especially now that our sister's safety was again in doubt.

'I was referring to Cairo.' My husband corrected my misunderstanding. 'They can talk about their demon banishing spells on the

way.'

My jaw dropped open. I could hardly believe that my husband: A) was prepared to go to Cairo, and, B) could speak of anything occult in a casual, accepting manner. 'Is this Lord Devere before me, or some impostor?'

'I saw something tonight that I cannot explain,' he said seriously. 'Once I have a reasonable assurance that there is no further danger to our family, *then* I shall go home.'

James knew I was proud of his resolution, but I suspected that he wasn't pursuing this mystery to please me any more. He now had a personal agenda. What had he seen tonight?

I had no time to ask as Malory agreed with my lord that we needed to leave Alexandria while the going was still good.

'Wait.' Mr Devere took hold of Lord Malory's arm. 'Did you have any involvement in the death of Lord Hereford?'

'No.' He refuted the suggestion doggedly. 'I have explained—'

Mr Devere held up a finger to silence Lord Malory and focused on the man's inner thoughts.

'He's telling the truth,' my brother-in-law stated, to set all our minds at ease. His and my own at least. I believe my husband still had his doubts about his brother's psychic abilities.

Lord Malory was smiling now, and not because he had been cleared of the suspicion of murder. 'Your full potential has been realised,' he stated, proud of his student. 'I can train you to hone these abilities. You can be of greater assistance to your wife in her quest. And, clearly, you must now know that my intentions are the best. I have done only what I must to ensure your wife's safety and wellbeing.'

Mr Devere had not let go of the lord's hand and again he focused on Malory's inner knowing. 'Why didn't you tell me about Mrs Devere's destiny?'

'Prophecy is not an exact science, even for someone so talented as Lady Charlotte,' Malory explained. 'We had no way of knowing your wife would pursue this quest until she chose to do so of her own free will. Had you known, and perhaps warned her of our suspicions, would such a wilful soul as she still have taken it up with such fervour?'

'What have you planned for our children?' Devere remembered Ashlee's concern and decided to clear up the matter while he had Lord

Malory on the spot.

‘Only what they, in the grand scheme, choose for themselves.’ Malory was clearly troubled by his student’s doubts about the brotherhood. ‘It has been foreseen that your children will achieve great spiritual enlightenment, but this is not something the brotherhood can bring about. Our function is one of protection, not dictation.’

‘Protection from whom?’ I stepped in to inquire. ‘Molier?’

Malory shook his head.

‘Are you referring to the church?’ Lord Devere was clearly shocked and uncomfortable with the suggestion.

Again Malory shook his head. ‘The church are a concern, but they are by no means the greatest. But, no need to worry. For regardless of its shortcomings, the church has come to play a beneficial role in society and we have no intention of destroying their function, now that they are finally doing more good than harm.’

Lord Devere’s patience and beliefs were being sorely tried. ‘I believe that god knows the truth, and if the church needs deconstructing the Almighty will arrange it.’

‘Absolutely correct. But god works through men, Lord Devere,’ Malory suggested, ‘and I trust that by the end of this adventure, you shall be seeing life, the world and its history in a very different light.’

‘No truth higher than the truth,’ Mr Devere reminded his brother of their family motto. ‘There is no point in arguing what time will tell us. Best keep your eyes and mind open and discern the truth for yourself.’

Lord Devere looked to me to ascertain my thoughts on the matter. “‘I know nothing compared to everything there is to know and learn’.” I quoted the philosopher Socrates. ‘Knowledge flows from right action and thus, so long as we adhere to our purest intentions then god is working through us.’ I referred back to what Lord Malory had said, managing to unite both sides of the argument, rather than take sides and cause a greater divide.

‘Bravo.’ Lord Malory praised my reasoning. ‘Spoken like a true Cavandish...and a true Devere for that matter.’

I was pleased with the compliment and my husband was plainly proud of me also. ‘So, gentlemen, shall we depart Alexandria before we are arrested?’

‘That is a very good idea,’ Mr Banks announced from where he stood by the door of the lounge, waiting to escort us out. We had obviously worn out our welcome. How much of the conversation had Mr Banks overheard—might some of the subject matter have caused him offence. Or was it that he’d just had to spend all this time apologising to the local authorities for the false alarm? Either way, he wasn’t disposed toward hearing apologies or explanations. He just wanted Malory’s six henchmen and us off the premises.

FROM THE TRAVEL JOURNALS OF MRS ASHLEE DEVERE

Cingar and I boarded a boat at the Mahmudiya, the canal connecting Alexandria with the Nile. I felt a little guilty to be resting upon a mattress, wrapped in a blanket to keep warm, when our Arab boatmen, ropes wrapped around their chests, were towing our boat down the canal.

I guessed that feeling guilty for them took my mind off feeling guilty for abandoning my dear Mr Devere again. I did miss his company, but I had not come all this way to turn back now. Having nearly been bowled over and discovered by Lord Devere in Maximoff’s courtyard, I felt secure in the knowledge that Earnest would have friends around him, despite my absence. Still, I did wonder what had brought Lord Devere to Alexandria, when he’d been determined to head home to England.

My treasure stone was itching my palm and I summoned my knight to console me.

You did the right thing. Albray manifested and got right to the heart of my anguish. The return of those vials is worth any risk that must be faced in the process.

I felt sure you would think so. I still had my doubts about that. Am I putting my unborn child at risk?

The only risk is that he might be born into a better, safer world.

He? I noted that the knight had given my child a gender and Albray nodded to confirm that it had not been a slip of the tongue.

And a very masterful soul in the field of knowledge synthesis he shall be. Thus, I assure you, there will be no stopping him from fulfilling the destiny that he has charted for himself in this world, my knight assured me in all seriousness. *Your wellbeing during this time is naturally a major*

concern to him and if you thought yourself powerful before his conception, you are triply so now. For he shan't allow any harm to befall the sacred vessel that shall deliver him unto his destiny.

I smiled, liking the idea that my son-to-be was protecting me.

This soul chose you and this time for a reason, in the full knowledge of your current situation, he continued. Your intuition is one of your greatest gifts, and your instinct was to finish the quest you started, despite putting yourself at odds with the man you love. If you had truly been meant to turn back, don't you think you would have felt it instinctively? And besides, Bedouin women manage to have children whilst being on the move all the time.

My knight's reasoning was sound as always. I just wished that my husband could have been so supportive.

'Feeling guilty?' Cingar took a seat alongside me.

'Not any more,' I replied, pulling the blanket tighter around me. Even my green velvet attire didn't keep the chill at bay. 'How do the Arabs cope with these extreme temperature fluctuations?'

Cingar ignored my attempt to change the topic. 'What is so important that you would risk your happiness to pursue it?'

'Some things are more important than individual happiness,' I told him, although I knew a gypsy would find this hard to understand.

'Like freedom?' he suggested, trying to fathom my motive.

'Like obligation and duty.'

He pouted and gave a nod as he considered this. 'An obligation that is higher than marriage must be serious indeed?'

'I believe so.' I suppressed a yawn and gave my eyes a rub. 'I wish I could tell you the details of my quest, but the fact is, it would only place you in more danger than you already are. It would be wise, after you arrange my transport into the Sinai, for you to return home to Italy.'

'I am not renowned for my wisdom.' He sidestepped the issue. 'And you are weary.' He changed the subject, as he always did when I mentioned his going home.

I was tired. 'I cannot get comfortable.' Every time I tried to lie down I felt ill.

'Here.' Cingar offered me a shoulder on which to rest my head and I was grateful for it.

I felt safe nestled between my gypsy and my knight. Two more faithful travelling companions I could not have wished for. Still, as I rested my head and allowed my eyes to close, several things plagued my thoughts. Firstly, that during my hasty retreat from the Maximoffs' I had left Lord Hereford's journal with my husband, and my journey through the desert would have been the perfect time to read it. Secondly, I suspected that Molier knew of my intended destination, and that there would be no outrunning him.

The goddesses of the ages are watching over you, I heard Albray's voice in my mind. *Sleep soundly in that knowledge...*

By eight o'clock the next morning I was standing on the banks of the River Nile, the eternal river of Egypt, having slept for most of the journey down the canal.

Despite the locals' praise of the wonderful quality of the waters of the Nile, Cingar warned me against drinking it, lest I spend the rest of the journey ill. He had brought supplies of drinking water from the Maximoffs' private well in Alexandria for me to drink.

The riverbank was lined with abundant foliage, groves and palm trees, which was a striking contrast against the African landscape. Nestled amid the greenery was the village of Fouah, and with its mosques and whitened domes it made the Nile well worthy of its historic fame and beauty.

Upon entering the Nile we changed boats, to one of a class called *canjiah*, which was much larger, about seventy feet long, with two enormous triangular sails. The boat was manned by ten Arabs and a rais (or captain). In the stern there was a low-ceilinged cabin, in which even I could not stand upright, as it was made for the cross-legged habits of the Eastern people. Still, I was more than grateful for the protection from the elements.

Four days on the Nile furnished us with nothing of particular interest to distract from the heat of the days and the cold nights. On one side of us was the delta, well cultivated and watered, and on the other side was a narrow strip of fertile land and then the Libyan desert beyond. Tiny villages littered the way, with huts so small that the people crawled in through the doorways to enter and exit. There was frightful poverty and disease here; children with heads so bloated and deformed that my stomach turned upon sighting them. The mother in me wanted to help them somehow, but due to my own pregnancy I dared not get close.

Toward evening on the fourth day we came in sight of one of the world's great wonders. Directly in front of us, the giant pyramids of Giza were standing at the head of a long reach in the river. Against the cloudless sky their lofty summits seemed solitary and majestic as they were lit by the lurid red gleam of the setting sun. The magic moment tugged on my heartstrings unexpectedly and I found myself wishing that my husband was here to see this with me. Despite the awe of the spectacle I felt homesick, not for England, but for Devere. *Home is where the heart is.* I had forgotten how much it hurt to be separated from him—not so much at first, but as the days passed I craved his company more and more. Obviously my request to my foremothers to banish my husband from my heart and thoughts had been in vain—perhaps the ladies of the Elohim did not feel my wish was essential to my quest.

If you are going to pine for your lover, could you please dismiss me and remove the stone from your person? Albray appealed.

You're not jealous? I ribbed him in jest, thinking he was trying to make light of my heavy heart.

Of course I am.

I was so startled I dragged my eyes from the view to check if he was serious.

I never experienced what it was like to have a loving relationship. Albray was dead serious. I envy the love you feel in your husband's company. Perhaps that's why I find our quest easier when you're apart from him, then I don't have to be constantly reminded of what was denied me.

I removed the stone's chain from around my wrist and put it in my pocket. *Is there no such thing as reincarnation?*

Not for a soul who is bound in death to the service of the ladies of the Elohim. Even if you succeed in returning the vials, I shall still be compelled to watch over them for all eternity. There will be no next-time-around for me.

Why did you make such a vow, Albray...because of your priestess?

To save her life. He managed to make his confession sound as if it was not the slightest bit heroic and selfless, but rather stupid and pointless. *In all honesty, I think that we would both be happier now if I had not. To care for someone more than life is one thing, but to care for someone else more than*

your eternal soul is something else. Now both our souls exist in a perpetual purgatory, each more constrained by guilt than love.

Is there nothing I can do? I so wanted to be able to help my knight after all he had done for me, out of duty or not. Can I not appeal to the council on your behalf?

No, I will stand by my choice, he stated. I do not regret my vow for myself, but for Lillet. She will not move on in the grand scheme of creation, as it is her right to do. She insists on remaining in the sub-planes with me until I am released from this service, which was my choice and not hers.

I could see now why Albray claimed their tragic relationship was built on guilt, but there was also selflessness and compassion.

I only hope that one day she will be called to move on and forget me, he concluded solemnly. Perhaps you could ask the council for that.

Obviously his honour meant more to the knight than his eternal soul, and despite his wishes to the contrary I decided that I would appeal Albray's case with my foremothers. It was the very least I could do.

The next morning at seven o'clock we were crossing from the Island of Roda in another small boat to Bulak, the harbour of Cairo. Half an hour and a short donkey ride later, Cingar and I were entering the walls of Grand Cairo—and what a spectacle of multiculturalism it was. There were Turks, some with eight to ten women in tow completely enveloped in dark silk. There were Greeks, Armenians and Jews in turbans and striking costumes, scantily dressed Arabs and swarthy Bedouin of the desert. Crossing the square we jostled against camels, dromedaries, horses and donkeys, trying to hold our breath for fear of plague until we reached the large wooden gate which divided the Frankish quarter from the often hostile local population.

‘Here we shall make provision for our journey to the Suez.’ Cingar assured me that we would be leaving the filthy city before nightfall. ‘Old Cairo is far more pleasant on the senses,’ he assured me. But as the ancient part of the city was situated about four miles from Bulak, my schedule did not permit time for sightseeing.

FROM THE HONEYMOON JOURNAL OF LADY SUSAN DEVERE

Our journey down the Nile was well spent, learning as much about our adversary as possible.

Mr Devere had been engrossed in reading the journals of Lord Hamilton for some days now and had been relaying the tale of his adventures in the Sinai over dinner every evening.

‘The journal claims that when Lord Hereford opened the gateway to the Star-Fire Temple, a creature was released from it that had been dwelling within the mount for a long time...at least since the last time it was opened. He estimated, from the body of a crusader knight found therein, that it may have been sealed for about six hundred years!’

My husband had gone rather pale and I guessed that, like me, he was remembering Lord Malory’s assertion that Ashlee’s destiny was to destroy just such a beast. Lord Devere looked to Lord Malory who had raised his brows as if to say, ‘What did I tell you?’

‘If Molier is the creature I saw when I found Earnest, there is nothing human about him,’ Lord Devere posed. ‘How are we expected to kill something that is not of this earth? The creature shattered into a spirit state just like that!’ He clicked his fingers to demonstrate the speed of the transformation.

‘But Molier was once of this world,’ Lord Malory corrected. ‘A man, just like you or I.’ As Lord Devere appeared sceptical, our host decided to explain further. ‘A journal in the possession of our brotherhood, written by a thirteenth-century priestess of the Cathar faith, tells of a renegade Sion knight named Christian Molier. He was assisting her to return a treasure to the Star-Fire Temple in the Sinai after the final siege of Montségur in the thirteenth century. But when they arrived inside the temple, Molier tried to steal the treasure from the priestess, intending to use the site’s supernatural power to his own ends. Another knight of the order, who remained true to the cause, saved the priestess. The knight sacrificed his own life in order to trap Molier in the mountain, where he remained until Lord Hereford’s visit hundreds of years later.’

Lord Devere and myself were too stunned to speak, and before my husband could express his disbelief, Mr Devere asked: ‘And do you know the name of this heroic knight?’ My brother-in-law swallowed hard, as if he anticipated the answer.

Lord Malory grinned broadly. ‘His name was Albray de Vere.’

Now we were all doubly stunned. I recalled Mr Devere telling me of the spirit of a knight who was advising his wife and I realised, as Mr

Devere must have, that the knight was some kind of guardian of the ancient, sacred site.

‘Oh, my god.’ Earnest’s mind was churning over, although I was the only one present who knew why he was so astounded.

‘Yes,’ Malory confirmed. ‘He was some great-great-uncle of yours. He was conceived during the first crusade, the bastard issue of a priestess in the Holy Land and a visiting forefather of the de Vere line.’

Lord Devere was having trouble digesting the information. ‘Are you telling me that my forefathers ran around raping Middle Eastern priestesses —’

‘No.’ Malory held up a finger to stress the point. ‘It was an arranged pairing, specifically to produce a pure-blood prince of the Royal House of Judah.’

‘What!’ Lord Devere stood up, he was so shocked.

‘Don’t you get it!’ Mr Devere stood to confront his brother before he launched into a sermon. ‘The knighthoods, and the Star-Fire Temple and its treasures from which Molier draws his power. It’s all about the blood!’

‘Please tell me that you are not talking about the bloodline of our Lord Jesus Christ!’ Lord Devere demanded, ready to walk out of the room depending upon the answer.

‘We are talking of a bloodline that goes all the way back to the Nefilim goddesses of old.’ Earnest turned back to Lord Malory before his brother could argue the issue, for he had more urgent information to pursue. ‘You still haven’t answered the question of how we destroy Molier?’

Days ago, when we had first left Alexandria, Malory had instructed Devere to call upon his forefathers to shield us all from the sight of the creature my husband had seen—that much of the story Lord Devere did believe. Now that the subject of killing the creature had been raised again, Lord Devere remained present, curious to hear the response.

‘We can only speculate, for this quest has never been undertaken before,’ Malory explained. ‘In searching for an answer we have turned to legends dealing with the undead for guidance.’

‘Oh, please!’ Lord Devere said in disgust.

‘Fortunately for us, Christian Molier and his associates at the Arsenal Library seem to have a fascination with the subject of vampires and similar legends and have written extensively on the subject.’

‘Really?’ Mr Devere was surprised. ‘But isn’t that self-destructive?’

‘Molier’s entire existence is self-destructive,’ Malory replied. ‘He has done a fine job in his plays and writings of making the vampire appear heroic and misunderstood, but it is written that the three fatal dangers are these: a stake through the heart, but only if it severs the spinal cord, decapitation, and fire.’

‘Fire.’ The last point caught Devere’s attention. ‘Interesting then that inside the Star-Fire Temple there are several pits that can be filled with a flammable liquid and set alight.’

‘But I still don’t understand how Molier could stay alive all that time in the temple? Or how he has now become more spirit than man?’ Lord Devere was frustrated by all the gaps in the story.

‘I think you might best sit down before I explain that conundrum, Lord Devere.’ Malory gestured for my husband to be seated once more and he reluctantly complied. Although my lord found much of the brotherhood’s beliefs hard to swallow, he could not deny what he, with his own eyes, had seen.

The hours that followed were some of the most fascinating of my life. We were told of the Star and Fire vials, at least one of which Malory suspected Ashlee had in her possession, although Mr Devere would not confirm or deny the allegation. We were told of the vials’ function as keys to a greater treasure, and how the vials themselves contained mysterious ambrosias, miraculously self-filling and said to grant immortality and spiritual advancement to those of the blood.

‘But why turn to vampire legends?’ Lord Devere was curious about this point. ‘The defining trait of a vampire is that they drink the blood of the living.’

‘A common misconception, fabricated by the church to prevent the drinking of blood,’ Lord Malory answered, before going on to explain the difference between the Highward Fire-Stone, made from ORME specifically to heighten the awareness of the females of the holy line, and the Fire-Stone, made from the menstrual blood of the Nefilim goddesses, which was fed to the males of the line who had been singled out for leadership.

Lord Devere was solicitous of my sensibilities. ‘This is hardly a fitting topic to be discussing in the presence of a lady.’

I had to smile at my husband's embarrassment. 'I would think I am far more qualified on the subject matter than you are, my lord. I do not find it offensive,' I assured Lord Malory and bade him continue.

'Molier is not of the blood. Though he is a sworn defender of the cause,' Malory scoffed, disgusted by the betrayal of the order by such a high-ranking initiate. 'The text pertaining to his entrapment in the temple stated that although the Star vial had been safely locked away in its annexe, the Fire vial was still in Molier's possession when the gateway was closed to imprison him. We believe that he consumed the contents of the vial to remain alive all those centuries, and took the vial with him when Lord Hereford accidentally released him from the temple. As the elixir was meant only for the males of the blood, we suspect that, although it has extended Molier's life and given him heightened psychic abilities, it must also have had debilitating effects.'

'How do you mean?' Devere was pleased to be breaking new ground, having already known that which currently had Lord Devere and myself reeling in shock.

'Well, for example,' Malory motioned to Mr Devere, 'if you were to be fed the Fire-Stone substance, your physical strength would become the equivalent of ten men and your life expectancy would also be increased. You would have the ability to change form and levitate, just as Molier does. However, you would not suffer the same intolerance to sunlight that he does for your atomic structure possesses the Gene of Isis. Your love of your wife, who also possesses this gene, then heightens your psychic powers. No Chosen ruler could be without the understanding of true love and survive.'

'Is that why the very ancient pharaohs of Egypt were recorded as living for extraordinary lengths of time?' I mused out loud.

'Exactly, Lady Devere,' Malory said, and my husband looked displeased that I was supporting the Grand Master's theories. 'But Molier has no such love of the goddess and even if he did, without the Gene of Isis it would serve him not,' Malory continued. 'He is dependent on the Fire-Stone substance and is condemned to live in darkness for the rest of his days. My personal theory is that the Fire-Stone—despite sending all Molier's atoms into a high-spin state, each a spinning vortex absorbing cosmic light into his physical and light-body—has not enabled him to return

that life-giving energy back to the cosmos; that is, the outward-spinning vortexes of his subtle bodies.'

'The chakras,' Mr Devere noted, nodding in understanding.

'Yes.' Malory was pleased that at least one person was understanding this discussion. 'I think, in Molier's case, his atoms are consuming that vital life force, but as his light-body is unprepared for such a large degree of digestion and transmutation, the consequence is the damming of the cosmic energy within his physical form.'

'You could be quite right about that, my lord,' Mr Devere concurred. 'Molier's light-body is very strange indeed. Whilst his aura sparkles golden, as an enlightened soul does, his chakra centres are bogged with darkness.'

Malory smiled, amazed and proud at how much his student had learned. 'You noted this personally?'

'I did,' Mr Devere confirmed, suppressing a cocky smile. 'When I met him in Paris.'

'That might also explain Molier's intolerance to light,' I suggested, fascinated. 'As his system is so dammed up by light, he can't possibly sustain any more.'

'Interesting.' Malory smiled at my theory.

'So, rather than raising his physical body closer to a spiritual state of being, the Fire-Stone may be drawing Molier's spiritual body closer to his physical which gives longevity?' Mr Devere pondered the premise and found it deeply curious. 'That would surely have devastating effects on his soul-mind? For Molier's spirit would, in effect, be merging with his physical body, and perhaps even be trapped inside his physical form.'

'He didn't look too trapped in the physical when I saw him,' Lord Devere reminded us.

'Not while he remains undead and taking the Fire-Stone,' Mr Devere said. 'But what might happen if his physical body was destroyed? Does the soul-mind trapped therein perish? Where do vampires go when they die?'

'Wherever the damned go,' Lord Malory proposed, and we all knew he was referring to hell.

'If Molier fears his own demise that would explain why he is after both vials. Perhaps he believes that the treasure they will unlock can in some way prevent his eternal damnation?' I added my two pence worth.

‘Well, at least we have a vague motive, I guess.’ My husband was processing so much information that he didn’t know where to start any argument, and so decided to forgo the opportunity for now.

‘In which case, death by fire is our best chance for destroying Molier,’ Mr Devere decided.

Malory realised there was one catch. ‘But only if we can surprise him while he is in physical form.’

Everyone present took a deep breath and sighed, realising our plan of attack still required quite a bit of serious thought.

Mr Devere appeared the most concerned. ‘I just hope we can catch up to my wife before she opens the gateway.’

LESSON 22

LOVE

FROM THE TRAVEL JOURNALS OF MRS ASHLEE DEVERE

Eight hours after departing Cairo in the direction of the rising sun, we were travelling across as perfect a desert as if we had moved thousands of miles away from civilisation. The Bedouins referred to the wilderness as the open sea, and loved it better than any landscape the East had to offer.

I had not forgotten Jessenia's warning in regard to riding a horse in my condition, and I was not ignorant enough to suppose that a camel would be any more favourable. I had been forced to tell Cingar about my pregnancy so that he could make provision for it. Although he now understood my husband's frustration and was doubly displeased by my decision to pursue my quest, Cingar assured me that with enough money, anything could be arranged.

'Would jewels or coin be preferable?' I assured my guide that money was no object.

Thus it was that I found myself travelling in the style of an Arabian princess. Atop my camel was strapped a carriage compartment, with a roof, two solid walls at the front and back, and a flat floor. To my right and left were thick curtains that could be drawn back, or closed and tied to keep out the desert winds and sand. Beneath me the floor of my travelling compartment was lined with rugs and cushions to absorb some of the impact of the jarring motion of my ride.

To act as a guide, Cingar had procured a Bedouin man well known to him, in whom he claimed to have implicit confidence. Our caravan consisted of ten camels, our guide and three young camel drivers, all of whom we were required to make provision for during the journey.

Our camels, at a steady pace, were capable of covering twenty-five miles a day. I was told they could reach speeds of twelve miles per hour, but bearing my condition in mind, Cingar insisted we did not push our luck.

Our Bedouins didn't know quite what to make of me, a woman dressed like a man, who carried a sword and a pistol, but as Cingar made it clear that I was paying for this little expedition, I was treated with the utmost respect. I imagine the fear that I could dispense with their services as quickly as I had employed them, and thus withhold food, water and shelter, might have had something to do with the Bedouins' faithful reverence.

Even in the shade of my compartment the desert heat during the day was nearly unbearable and I felt for Cingar enduring the full pelt of the sun. He assured me he'd tolerated the same conditions many times before.

After three days of travel we passed the only landmark to speak of between Cairo and Suez—a large green palm tree. It took three more hours to leave the landmark behind us and I could well understand why the locals preferred the vast sandy nothingness, as there was less to mark the slow progress of the passage. Still, the tree did serve as a preoccupation for the better part of a day.

By high noon the next day we came in sight of Suez, which appeared as a tiny dark city when compared to the mountains that neighboured it on both shores of the Gulf. Not one blade of grass graced the shore of the unsalubrious waters, so Suez relied on supplies from Cairo to keep the residents fed. The purpose of this city was mainly as a place of trade for the great caravans to Mecca, and both Cingar and the Bedouins agreed that we should only water our camels from the well and then move on. As I had been informed that the crossing of the Suez marked the halfway point of our journey, I was just as eager to keep moving and avoid any questions.

On crossing the Suez we entered the Sinai proper and for the first time since commencing my journey, I truly felt myself treading in the footsteps of my dearly departed Lord Hamilton. I could hardly imagine how his wife, Clarissa, had survived this journey wearing the attire of an English lady; with a light cloak over my silk shirt, I was still sweltering, and suffering from heat rash that itched with a vengeance underneath my corset. I did not wear the undergarment as tightly as most ladies would, and had it not held my treasure I would have dispensed with it altogether.

Albray had been greatly enjoying our travel in the desert, but then he did not have to suffer the heat. He did, however, sense my discomfort via the stone I wore, but as we were now so close to our destination he would not condone me removing the charm from my person.

We were one day out from the mount we sought when Albray's good mood appeared to diminish somewhat. I was feeling rather weak and poorly by this stage and I gathered that my physical ailments might have been disturbing him.

'Please won't you let me remove the stone from my person?' I appealed, feeling guilty. 'I can't stand to see you suffer at my expense when you have already suffered so much in your own lifetime.'

I am not suffering, I am worrying. He faced me from his cross-legged perch in my compartment. *I've been unable to locate Molier's whereabouts since we banished him in Ostia. I felt sure I would have been able to spot his party in the open desert, but I have been unable to locate them.*

'Perhaps they are not following us, or have taken a different route to the mount?'

No, he said with certainty. They would be close by now, or arrived, and they have not. Molier will not allow his precious vial to be locked in the mount, when he is dependent on its contents...of that much I am sure.

'Then how could he hide from your sight?' I asked. 'Can he shield himself from us as we have from him?'

Molier cannot call on your great ancestors to shield him as he is not of your bloodline, Albray informed me.

'Then maybe he can call on some other protector?'

Yes, Albray said gravely, *and that is my worry.*

'Why so?'

There is no point in speculating, Albray answered after a pause. He forced a smile, clearly not wanting to cause me undue alarm.

'According to metaphysical laws, no entity or spirit more spiritually advanced than he could come to his aid. And from what I have observed of Molier, his light-body is a bog of negative energy.' That's when I realised Albray's worry. 'You don't believe in demons, Albray, surely?' I was almost amused by the premise.

Not in the biblical sense, he said, but there are sub-planes below the physical world that correspond with each progressive plane above this one. These are frequented by tortured souls, thought forms and alien entities that have yet to exceed lowly desires and pleasures. King Solomon, among many other scholars through the ages, wrote volumes on the subject and how they

might be put to good use. And I'll grant that the Arsenal Library in Paris houses many such texts.

'Let us hope you are wrong about that.' Now I really was feeling ill.

Mid-morning, on our fifth day of travel from the Suez, our mounts scaled the hard dirt track that led to the top of Mt Serâbit. Excitement and fear gripped my stomach. I was so tense I could barely consume water, let alone eat.

If you would just partake of a little of the Highward Fire-Stone, your strength and vitality would be restored. Albray had been trying to persuade me to take the substance for days.

'Am I dying, do you think?' I asked for his opinion only half in jest; deep down I knew I was fine, although I did feel like death warmed up today. I had already told Albray that, because I was pregnant, I would only take the mysterious substance to save my life.

No, you are not dying, Albray conceded, frustrated, *but you are weak and in no state to combat a psychic attack!*

'I fear I left my strength back in Alexandria.' How I wished I could be back in that bath with Devere. My being literally ached to feel him close, wet and cool against my skin.

Albray rolled his eyes. *He is not back in Alexandria. He is less than one day behind us.*

'Really?' My spirits suddenly soared at the notion that I could be reunited with him within the day. 'How much less than a day behind us?'

My knight was grinning now, caught up in my elation. *That would depend on how early he arose this morning. But, as he is in the company of some gentlemen that we do not entirely trust, it would be preferable to complete our quest before your husband arrives.*

Good cheer departed and my fear returned. 'His brotherhood?' I ventured to guess, although I desperately wanted the answer to be in the negative.

Albray nodded.

'The man who threatened my Lord Hereford?' I almost choked on my words.

The very one.

‘Your personal power will only be realised upon her pleasure...And, with any luck, you’ll have many, many adept offspring.’ The man’s words, from the memory I accessed in Devere’s mind, came back to me forcefully.

What if the secret brotherhood had discovered that I had fled Devere and had now come in pursuit of me personally? What if they knew I was with child? What did they have planned for me and my family? And worst of all, what if the brotherhood sought the vials in my possession for their own purposes?

Questions and doubts cured any homesickness I might have felt for either England or Devere. ‘Do you think my suspicions of Devere’s brotherhood are justified? After all, you belonged to a brotherhood, not so very different.’

Such brotherhoods exist for your protection, he reasoned. But their agenda does not always accord with the individual initiate’s.

‘And what was your brotherhood’s agenda?’ I wondered what my dear friend had ultimately died for.

To preserve the greater mysteries, and the bloodline of Isis, until such time as mankind is ready to dispense with religious doctrine altogether and think for himself...or herself. Then the wisdom of the ancients can be released into safe hands and be used for the higher good of creation.

‘Do you think that time is now, Albray?’

That would be nice. The knight obviously cherished the thought. *And that would make my vow pretty much redundant. Still, he did not look too hopeful, do you really think that all those godfearing folk you left behind in England are ready to know all that you have learned?*

I winced when I considered the uproar such an account would cause in merry old England. ‘I think they would bring back witch burning, just for me.’

I think you might be right. Albray clearly felt he was in for a wait. *However, I am sure that the outcome of today might have a bearing on the advancement of that time that has been hailed as ‘the end of days’.*

This comment shed a whole new light on the dogma of the Book of Revelation that had been feared by all of Christendom for so long. It seemed that this time of reckoning was an event to look forward to and not to be dreaded.

Our party came to a stop below the incline that led up to a rocky peak and Lord Hamilton's excavation site, which had almost entirely been swallowed by the desert sand once more. Ahead lay the large round metal gateway, encircled by a ring of mysterious black stone embossed with ancient hieroglyphs.

I had expected that we would have to excavate the gateway, and we had brought shovels and picks with us for the chore. Considering the amount of time since the gate had been opened, I had thought it would have been buried by the sandy dirt churned up by the sirocco winds. And yet, here it was, glistening in the sun as if it had just been exposed and polished for our use. The entrance was just as Lord Hamilton had described it.

Our entire party stood in awe of our discovery, until the Bedouins spied several wild camels wandering around the ruins further up the mount, and with a mighty cheer, they ran off to round the beasts up.

'Where the hell did they come from?' Cingar was immediately suspicious, although the beasts were not saddled. 'I shall investigate. There are places enough amongst these boulders for bandits to hide.' The gypsy borrowed my pistol and whistled to the Bedouins to advise them to exercise more caution.

Whilst the rest of my party were preoccupied with searching around the rocky mount and excavation site above me, Albray had me scale the rock face alongside the strange metal gateway until I came to stand on top of it. 'Well, that was fun.' I wiped the sweat from my brow and neck. 'What now?' I looked to Albray for further instruction.

Take the stopper from the Star vial and pour the contents over the door.

'But surely, even all the contents won't be nearly enough to cover the doorway?' I knew the vial was self-filling, but would that still be the case if every last grain of the substance was spent?

It will be all right, Albray assured me, knowing my fears. *I've done this myself.*

I pulled the vial from its usual resting place in my cleavage—the Fire vial I still kept in its velvet case in a shoulder bag that I wore underneath my cloak. I removed the stopper and, kneeling down to get close to my target, I began to pour the Highward Fire-Stone down over the door. It flowed in a steady stream from the tiny vial and, as there was not a breath of wind, the glittering particles were attracted to the metal. I was amazed at

the amount of the substance that gushed down over the gateway, and when I had at last coated the entire barrier, I turned the vial upright to find it still full. 'That's incredible,' I uttered, amazed. An ear-splitting sound of buckling metal urged me to get off the gateway and down to ground level.

I backed away from the gateway, unable to peel my eyes from the sight of the tiny light-filled specks that seemed to be eating through the barrier. Then, in a final burst of blinding light, a void was exposed inside the dark ring of hieroglyphs.

'Dear goddess.' I was so stunned by the spectacle that I couldn't move. The moment of truth had arrived. 'It looks dark in there.' I could have used the Star vial to light my way in, but how would I get out?

I moved to our pack-camel as it carried the long-stemmed torches that the Arabs used to light the camp at night. The top of the torch was wrapped in fabric that had been doused in a flammable substance and with one whiff I immediately recognised it. It was the same foul-smelling stuff contained in the bottle inside the hollow journal Lord Hereford had given me—which I had also left with Devere. The Bedouins held a thick rounded piece of glass some distance from the fabric, allowing the sun to burn into the cloth. Where the ray of light was focused, the cloth soon ignited. I used the same method to achieve my goal.

Albray looked around, unable to believe Molier was nowhere to be seen.

'You're being paranoid, the sun is far too bright for Molier.' Of that much I was sure.

Albray glanced to the horizon and spied something that bothered him.

I looked for the source of his concern to see storm clouds churning.

'How long until that gets here?'

An hour perhaps?

'Plenty of time to get in and out,' I said, moving off toward the gateway, determined to deliver my charge without further delay.

My knight accompanied me into the darkness; we didn't notice the four camels that descended to the gateway and follow us down the glistening red pathway.

At the entrance to the central chamber I was taken aback by the skeletal remains of a knight, and I realised at once that this was all that remained of

my dear Albray.

I've seen better days. Albray attempted to make light of the moment, but I realised how disturbing it must be for him, and so I did not stand and dwell on the tragedy.

'The best of you still lives on,' I replied, turning my attention to the spectacular chamber that was revealed in the light of my torch. 'You could have picked worse places to dwell for eternity.' My heart leapt into my throat at the sight. I felt such excitement at penetrating this ancient, sacred place that was still in immaculate condition. Now I truly understood Lord Hamilton's obsession with this site and why men had died to prevent its discovery and subsequent desecration.

I walked past the round canals that circled the chamber, down the entrance path that led to the crossroad of red, to approach the pillars that supported a beautiful golden dome. These huge columns depicted goddesses of the Egyptian pantheon. I was truly mystified by the artistry, which appeared to be as pristine and brilliant as the day it had been worked. In the centre of these four amazing pillars was a round platform where the red pathway extended out in the four cardinal directions. To one side of me was a white-pillared annexe; to the other an identical annexe with pillars of red at its entrance. Directly ahead was a large arched gold door. 'A sacred Ark could lie behind those doors,' I thought out loud, 'that could grant passage to another realm of existence.'

And you are one of the few mortals on this Earth who could activate the porthole without fatal results, Albray commented. *Are you tempted?*

'With a storm massing in the distance, and Molier's whereabouts unknown...?' I brushed off the once-in-a-lifetime opportunity, inwardly regretting that circumstances were not in my favour. Only the goddess knew what such exposure would do to my unborn babe. 'I think not. I am all for getting these vials back where they belong and retreating as fast as possible.'

A wise decision, Albray confirmed, smiling proudly at my restraint.

I moved toward the Fire-Stone's annexe and had not even cleared the dome when several gusts of a suspect, chilly wind rushed past me and around the chamber. I halted, put on guard by this development.

The vial, Albray urged me. *Now!* I was so rattled by the sudden negative atmosphere in the chamber that I complied with Albray's

instruction and, in my panic, I consumed rather more of the Star vial substance than I had to date.

My inner being seemed to explode with bright light that was just as inwardly blinding as the dispersal of the gate had been to my external sight. The world beyond my own being vanished, and I felt myself propelled into a timeless, weightless void of pure peace, contentment and love. I struggled to hold on to this vast, all-knowing, all-loving feeling, more exciting than any ancient knowledge, discovery or experience I had witnessed since birth. I felt connected to the answer I had been ceaselessly chasing all my life... *What is god? And what in the heavens was the Almighty thinking, placing me in this era?* The answer was just as the Bible had always claimed: god is love, the bliss and contentment that is the inspiration of creation. The divine was the birth of every new and constructive contribution in the evolution of life.

You must return to me. I need you now, a male voice instructed. Although the message was clear, the source sounded far away. I felt I should recognise this voice. Was it that of my knight? *Albray!*

The recollection of him brought me rocketing back to my senses. To my great relief, the situation had not altered. Albray seemed no more alarmed than he had when I'd left him. I could only assume that my little trip to heaven had been momentary.

Thanks for calling me back to reality, Albray, I bethought my knight, as we both warily eyed the spaces beyond the central golden dome.

Did you go somewhere? he replied uneasily.

Now that I thought about it, the voice had not been Albray's, and yet not entirely unfamiliar. *Well, if you did not order my return from my ecstatic state, then who—?* My thoughts turned briefly to my son. Could it have been him? *I need you now,* the voice had said, and it was hardly like Albray to need me consciously present. More the other way around, really.

I gasped when I saw the shoes, attached to legs, attached to the rest of their bodies, floating down to stand in front of all four pathways that led from the dome—there was one man per direction. I recognised Molier, and Mr Jenkins from the Arsenal Library. Mr Jenkins' light-body had quite a few more dark patches than when last I'd seen him...his undead status was obviously a recent development.

It seems Molier has been initiating others. I drew my sword as Albray backed up toward me, preparing to enter my form.

But we have the vial? Albray didn't understand.

'The vial is self-filling.' Molier answered our unspoken query, exposing the fact that he could perceive Albray's presence. 'I have enough barrels of the Fire-Stone stashed away to keep a small army going for a century!' His eyes turned red, and he drew his sword. I noted that he carried a pistol on his belt also. Clearly his choice of weapon was for Albray's benefit—a sentimental gesture of challenge. 'And now that you are going to release both keys into my possession, my days of darkness and dependence on the Fire-Stone substance shall be over.'

'There is nothing here that can save you from damnation.' All I had to do was look at him to see how heavily the events of his abnormally long life weighed on his spirit.

Molier laughed in the face of my confidence, and started to walk toward me. 'I love the way you can say that, having only just set foot in this temple for the first time. Whereas I spent six hundred years trapped in this place!' His raised voice conveyed his unhappiness at this fact. 'And, unlike anyone else who has stepped foot in this temple since it was abandoned by Moses, I have deciphered every hieroglyph and studied every artwork by the red glow of the Fire-Stone. I can assure you that as far as man's use of this site is concerned, there are a few hidden clauses.'

Albray stepped into my form and I felt his powerful presence take control of my physical body. He raised our weapon to block Molier's attack.

FROM THE HONEYMOON JOURNAL OF LADY SUSAN DEVERE

I had never been so glad to arrive anywhere as I was to arrive at the plateau atop Mt Serâbit. I knew I had the gruelling journey back through the stifling desert heat to endure, but at least I could be assured that the journey was half over. Even my lightest long-sleeved frock was not appropriate for these conditions, but since other Frankish women in the East managed to maintain their dignity and countenance, so could I. I did not feel comfortable dressing as the Arab women did, and could not dress as a man; I just didn't have Ashlee's daring or social abandon.

Our party arrived to find ten or so heavily laden camels, and the round gateway leading to the Star-Fire Temple open.

As Mr Devere jumped from his mount, Cingar ran to meet him. 'Praise the Great Mother you have arrived. I thought you'd never catch up!' The gypsy confessed to keeping the pace of his journey as slow as possible in the hope that Devere might be able to make up the distance between them. 'I delayed the opening of the gate long enough—' Cingar glanced to the gateway and was surprised to find it open. 'Perhaps not,' he was forced to concede, as he scratched his head. 'Well, I guess that might explain where the missing camels disappeared to, at least.'

'What missing camels?' Lord Malory came to stand beside Devere.

Cingar told us of the four strays they'd encountered upon arrival and of how he had feared they might belong to bandits. This also explained why he was not aware that Ashlee had already managed to open and enter the temple.

Something our party had failed to fathom was how Molier, intolerant to sunlight, could possibly travel into the middle of the desert. The only solution to his problem, we imagined, was that he would have to travel by night. We could not guess where he might seek shelter by day, but we had assumed that he was no threat during the daylight hours.

'Of course.' Lord Malory had to restrain himself from cursing in my presence. 'It has been suggested that vampires, if they drink the blood of an animal, can then assume its form! Perhaps the camel's form has protected Molier during his journey through the desert.'

'But there are four missing camels, you said?' Mr Devere directed the query at Cingar, and when the gypsy nodded his head, the concern of all increased.

'The creature has increased its number.' Malory was clearly horrified by the prospect. 'We must destroy them all.'

Lord Devere, Mr Devere, Lord Malory and Cingar drew their weapons. They were all armed with swords in addition to their pistols, as no bullet could kill our adversaries.

'If what you say about these creatures is true, then they all possess the strength of ten men!' I objected.

'She's right,' Lord Malory conceded. 'We need the Fire vial, for at least three of us could drink from it and even up the odds a little.'

‘I couldn’t possibly.’ Lord Devere was repulsed by the notion.

‘It’s amazing what you’ll do when your life is at stake,’ Malory challenged.

‘We have backup.’ Mr Devere gestured to Malory’s men. ‘They can surround the entrance and ensure nothing escapes.’

‘Torches.’ Cingar ordered the Bedouins to oblige his request with the greatest haste.

‘Not for us,’ Mr Devere decreed. ‘We need the cover of darkness if we hope to surprise them. I know the layout of the temple. It was detailed in Hereford’s journal.’ At another thought, Mr Devere added: ‘Have torches lit for Lord Malory’s men.’

‘So I am just expected to wait here, I suppose?’ I folded my arms, annoyed that I could not wield a sword. ‘I’ll have you know I’m not a bad shot with a hunting rifle.’

‘That’s good to hear.’ Devere handed me his pistol. ‘I need you to operate the lever.’

‘No.’ My lord flatly rejected the idea. ‘Get one of Malory’s men to do it.’

Mr Devere’s expression was dark—he was obviously not keen on the suggestion nor was he eager to state why, openly.

‘My dear pupil does not entirely trust his brothers any more,’ Malory explained.

‘But I do trust your wife,’ my brother-in-law told his brother.

Lord Devere did not have to ponder for long to realise he had to agree with his brother. ‘The lever is right by the door,’ he supposed. ‘So, as soon as you execute your part, you are to return out here in the greatest of haste.’

‘Of course,’ I assured him. Anything to get a look inside this great temple of mystique.

FROM THE TRAVEL JOURNALS OF MRS ASHLEE DEVERE

Molier was better with a sword than anyone Albray and I had challenged to date, but then he’d had centuries to perfect his skill. He was cautious of the torch in my hand, until he managed to nick the hand that held it and the torch dropped to the floor. He was also exceedingly strong and when we locked swords, Molier thrust me clear off my feet, then willed my sword

into his possession. The extent of Molier's psychic aptitude took both Albray and myself off guard.

'Give me the keys,' our antagonist requested, the tone of his voice smug with victory. 'I've killed you once, Devere. Would you have me sacrifice this *woman* due to your stubbornness?'

I felt Albray's resolve weaken and yet I was truly fuming, insulted not to be considered a threat. How dare this man be so arrogant in a temple of the goddess! Obviously, this pathetic creature was not aware that I'd had a bit of experience with psychophysics myself. I dispelled Albray from my form as I rose to stand and confront Molier's extended sword.

Molier smiled, believing that I was submitting.

I smiled too, noting the other three members of Molier's party closing in on me, swords drawn.

I cast my mind back to my darkest hour—a memory I had always done my best to repress. I realised in this moment that my reluctance to return to the asylum tower of the Black Rose was not fear of reliving my abandonment to the devices of such an evil man. What I feared was my own destructive potential, which I had not dared to unleash since that day. I knew that the child victims of Dr Rosen had achieved their revenge thanks to my underdeveloped and untrained psychic talent; the ability to control physical matter I had only temporarily lent to those dispossessed souls so that the murders might be stopped.

Trembling, I gathered my will unto me, drawing on the mastery of my mighty foremothers. My arms were crossed at my chest, and I abruptly thrust them, palm out, away from my body, whereupon all four of my attackers were sent rocketing backwards.

Molier, who was directly before me, was impaled on a sword, and as he dropped to his knees, I saw my dear Mr Devere at the handle of the debilitating stroke. As I turned full circle I saw that the same fate had befallen Molier's three accomplices, for all had been struck dead-centre in the chest and their spinal cords severed. It was only Molier who was still moving, for his injury was just right of centre.

'The lever,' Mr Devere cued Susan, who was standing by the control at the door.

Molier released a strange unearthly sound and, raising himself to standing, he walked forward to relieve himself of the sword through his

chest. Then he turned to Susan, who seemed mesmerised. 'Back away from that lever, Lady Devere...there's a good woman.'

When Susan did as instructed, Mr Devere protested. 'Don't listen to him, do it!'

Although Susan appeared regretful, she shook her head and backed up to the entrance.

'She cannot disobey me,' Molier informed us. 'Lady Devere and I have an understanding.'

Susan raised her pistol and aimed it at my husband.

'Hypnosis,' guessed the man who had threatened Lord Hamilton, who I later learned went by the name of Lord Malory.

Molier gave a chuckle of confirmation. He must have hypnotised Susan during her kidnapping.

'Release my wife, demon!' Lord Devere withdrew his sword from the dead man at his feet, of a mind to finish the creature himself.

'Ah. We wouldn't want your wife held responsible for killing your brother now, would we?'

Lord Devere halted, frustrated by the threat, when a hand clamped around his foot and pulled him to the ground. He turned to find his adversary clawing his way toward his throat; the creature may no longer have had use of its legs, but it still harnessed great strength in its upper body. Cingar and Lord Malory found they had the same problem on their hands.

'Now,' Molier turned back to face me, 'give me the keys or your best friend *will* kill your husband.'

My eyes narrowed in challenge, as I saw how my response would unfold. With a thought, I flipped the lever, unleashing a river of liquid into each of the canals; I recognised the smell of the substance at once. The sound of the lever being activated distracted Susan and provided my dear Devere the opportunity to overpower her. With a satisfied grin in Molier's direction, I casually kicked the idle torch into the closest canal and the liquid immediately ignited into flame. 'This *woman* will be the end of you, Molier.' I focused on his form and levitated him into the air.

The creature was panicked as he witnessed his fellow vampires being cast to the flames by my allies, where they perished beyond salvation, changing into several animals before they burned to cinders.

‘The goddess can go to hell, the like of which she condemned me to!’ Molier spat, shattering into a white mist, which, although I cast it to the flame, would not burn.

My body was crumpling under the duress of the concentration it took to contain the evil being and I fell to my knees for more stability. Albray could feel the vitality being sucked from my life force and he rushed to kneel at my side. *Let him go, before he kills you. There will be other days.*

But your freedom and Lillet’s? I strained, feeling my internal organs were going to burst.

Think about your son.

The pressure on his poor little being must have been enormous! With a deep exhalation of defeat, I let Molier go and the mist whipped out the exit and was gone.

Exhausted, I gasped for air to fill my pressured lungs. ‘I’m so sorry,’ I uttered aside to my knight. ‘I failed you.’

On the contrary, you can now accomplish exactly what we came here to do, Albray assured me.

‘Ashlee!’ My husband fell on his knees before me and embraced me for dear life. ‘I’ll never make you compromise your purpose again,’ he swore.

‘You won’t ever have to.’ I hugged him back. ‘My adventuring days are over.’

‘The storm is upon us!’ one of Malory’s men yelled down from the entrance.

I dragged myself from Devere’s kiss and stood. ‘Get out! Quickly!’ I urged everyone, as I ran between the flaming canals toward the pillars of red.

All my companions raced for the entrance, but when I returned from replacing the Fire vial in its annexe, Devere was still present.

‘Leave.’ I gave him a shove in the right direction as I raced past him on my way to the white-pillared annexe.

‘I am never leaving you again,’ he called after me defiantly. ‘That is a fate worse than death.’

His words tore at my heart, for I knew the pain he spoke of all too well.

Hurry, woman! Albray urged me on.

With no time to be sentimental about it, I placed the Star vial in its shrine, did an about-face and sprinted back to Devere, who awaited me beneath the golden dome.

His hand in mine, we raced toward the entrance passage, the deafening sound of buckling metal spurring us faster up the polished red incline. My body wanted to collapse so badly, and yet fear for my life ensured that I kept up my pace. Only a few paces short of escape the entrance shrouded in darkness and, with a mighty metal clap, Devere and I encountered a solid barrier. We were trapped!

‘No,’ I cried, bashing both my fists against the super-strong obstruction. The Star vial was now trapped inside with us, where its contents could not open the door. ‘Dear goddess, don’t let this be how it ends!’ I looked in Devere’s direction. I could not see him in the dim light, but I could hear him panting, as weary as I was. ‘You should have fled.’

‘My place is with you.’ His hand searched through the darkness until it found mine and squeezed it tight. ‘Come on.’ He urged me to follow him back down into the chamber. ‘If we don’t drain those canals below, we will suffocate all the faster.’

‘I’ve sealed the fate of our entire family...you, me, our son!’ I mumbled.

‘You know it’s a boy?’ my husband asked, still managing to maintain some cheer and pride.

‘Albray told me. Where is Albray?’ I wondered if he might have some bright idea for our release. I called for him, and for the first time ever, he did not respond to my summons. ‘Maybe he feels guilty?’ I couldn’t explain it. ‘Don’t abandon me now, old friend,’ I appealed, to no avail.

Devere flipped the lever and immediately the flames began to die down, as the fluid drained from the canals. ‘There are a few ways we might avoid ending our days in this place,’ he said confidently. ‘Firstly, you could try moving through the gateway, just as you did with the door in Molier’s office. If you take the Star vial with you, then you can dispense with the door and let me out.’

‘But without the sun to warm the particles we might have to wait days! Ah, but if you consume the Fire-Stone, you would survive!’ I breathed a sigh of relief. ‘Or better still, you may be able to pass through the gateway with me.’

‘We’ll cross that bridge when, and if, we come to it,’ Devere suggested. ‘If you are unable to penetrate the gateway, I doubt very much that I shall be able to. The Fire-Stone should be revered, and I shall only take it if my life depends on it.’

I was a little surprised that someone of the brotherhood would not be jumping at the chance to take the immortality-boosting substance, and this must have reflected in my expression.

‘I am not a pharaoh or a king,’ my husband explained. ‘I would not assume to abuse the treasure of the goddess as Molier has done...it certainly hasn’t done him any favours.’

‘But you are of the blood.’ I pointed out the obvious difference in their circumstances.

‘All the more reason for me to show respect and restraint,’ he argued winningly, before turning back to plan A. ‘However, if we remove the Star vial to attempt this, we are going to have to flood these pits again and set them ablaze, which is going to drain the oxygen supply. We’ll have to move quickly.’

‘By why must we set them alight?’ I queried, curious.

‘You obviously never read about this chamber in Lord Hereford’s journal,’ he teased. ‘I have. And trust me, we need to light the canals.’ With the Star vial in my hand and the chamber again ablaze, I stood before the gate and focused my will upon it. I called upon my foremothers to assist my intent, but after what seemed like an eternity, the cold barrier remained firm beneath my fingers. ‘Perhaps my battle with Molier has drained my psychic reserves?’

I had suspected that our escape would not be so easy. The material from which this temple was constructed seemed to be no ordinary metal compound. It was atomically linked to the Highward Fire-Stone, and clearly it would not be as easily penetrated as other substances known to mankind. Molier, in hundreds of years, had not managed to penetrate the barrier. I had hoped that being of the blood would make all the difference, but obviously not. I had already taken an excessive amount of the Highward Fire-Stone today, more than sufficient to achieve this task, so there seemed little point in taking any more. I also feared being so drawn to the celestial joys the substance induced that I might abandon my body altogether—Devere and our child needed me here right now.

‘Do you think this is the stuff that the prison cells for gods are made of?’ Devere attempted to make light of my failure, then descended the pathway to slip the lever to drain the canals once more.

I considered his jest not entirely unlikely. ‘I guess the gods needed to create some manner of containment for any renegades of their own kind—’

‘And the like of Molier,’ Devere coughed, as he tripped the lever.

‘And us, by the look of it.’ I wandered back down to the chamber. It reeked strongly of burnt chemicals that were abrasive on the throat when breathed in with the stale air.

The Highward Fire-Stone in my system didn’t prevent me feeling like I was going to choke, nor did it spare me from the need to breathe. I was not immortal; just more resilient than most mortals. I had an awful suspicion that once the air ran out, we would endure a constant state of suffocation—taking the contents of the vials would only keep death at bay. To accompany this agony I would endure a constant state of hunger and thirst. *Molier must have a will stronger than these walls to have survived six hundred years of such misery and torture.* This was not how I planned to raise my child.

‘There is one hope left.’ Devere took my hands in his, as the light in the chamber faded to the illumination provided by one torch, which was stuck in a wall mount by the entrance. ‘Lord Hereford speaks of a stash of the Star substance that he found inside the ruins of Hathor above us...with any luck my brother or Lord Malory will read the journal and find the key to getting us out of here.’

I was dubious of Lord Malory. ‘Did you tell your Grand Master about my pregnancy?’

‘I did not,’ he replied, pretending to be insulted. ‘I actually thought that your father should be the first to know.’

‘Oh.’ The thought of my father’s joy made me gasp and then cough. ‘How happy he will be at the news of a male heir to his estate!’

‘Lord Granville is not well, or so Malory informs me...that was part of the reason he sought you out.’ Devere knew the news was ill timed.

‘No! Father cannot die before he knows,’ I protested, knowing that a grandson was his dearest wish. I walked away from Devere to scold myself. ‘I should have returned to England when you asked me to.’ I turned back to Devere. ‘I was wrong, Earnest, and I’m sorry I did not figure that out before everyone had to suffer.’

My husband shook his head. 'It's not like you to give up so easily...I feel sure that in the end, your decision will be vindicated.' He held his arms wide.

I obliged the invitation and as I embraced my husband for his love and my regret, I gripped tightly to the stone in the palm of my hand. *Where are you, Albray?*

FROM THE HONEYMOON JOURNAL OF LADY SUSAN DEVERE

Outside the gateway of the temple we were confronted by an ambush. Lord Malory's knights had been surrounded by Arabs clothed entirely in black, right down to their fine mounts—even with our guides and camel herders we were outnumbered four to one.

Our shock of capture was quickly overcome when, with the sound of crashing metal behind us, we realised that Mr Devere and Ashlee had not made it out of the temple, but had been trapped inside.

My husband wasted no time in recruiting Cingar to speak with the Arabs. 'Ask them what they want from us.'

Cingar shouted the question over the blustery winds of the sandstorm and the leader of the band furnished the gypsy with an answer. 'They want us to leave with them,' he conveyed.

'Tell them we cannot leave. Two of our party have been trapped in the mount,' Lord Devere instructed. 'Do they know how we might get them out?'

Cingar obliged and then translated the reply. 'He said he cannot help those whom the mountain has chosen to claim.'

We tried to debate the matter further, but the Arabs would not discuss it. Our party and camels were rounded up and escorted down the mount, where we were shown into some caves to wait out the storm. The caves were not natural formations, but the remains of mining operations undertaken by the ancients.

I had hours to sit there and ponder how my failure to pull the lever on cue had delayed the proceedings in the temple. If not for me, we would all have made it out of the temple before the storm arrived.

'We are going to get them out.' Lord Devere urged me not to blame myself.

I had already suggested that Lord Hamilton's journal might hold some answers, but our captors were not letting us anywhere near our possessions, not even when we had Cingar tell them that we were only wanting to retrieve a book.

'I'm surprised we are still alive.' Cingar noted that the Arab band were all hardened warriors.

'I suspect that these men are not your average desert bandits,' Malory advised us all in a whisper. 'I believe these men are warrior-priests, belonging to the ancient brotherhood of the Melchi.'

'The Melchi,' Cingar echoed in disbelief. 'Surely that order couldn't have survived since the time of the Crusades?'

'Why not?' Lord Malory shrugged. 'Ours has.'

'And just how does this help us?' Lord Devere wondered, more concerned about freeing his kin than receiving a history lesson.

'Have you forgotten that you are related to the brave knight who originally trapped Molier?' Malory said, and Lord Devere's frown only deepened.

'Yes, but he was one of Sion's great knights, I doubt—'

'No...' Malory said, with a good serve of intrigue in his voice. 'That was only Albray Devere's alias. He was really one of theirs.' Malory rolled his eyes toward the black warriors. 'To them he was Albe-Ra, the Shining One.'

We feared some of our captors understood our conversation when several of them approached to pull us to our feet.

'What is happening?' Lord Devere looked at Cingar, unable to fathom the foreign chatter.

'The storm has passed and they are eager to escort us back to the Suez.' The gypsy was hoisted to his feet by two large Arabs.

'No! I refuse to leave!' I tore myself away from my captor and, to my horror, I also wrested from him his large curved sword, which was extremely heavy.

'Susan, no!' my husband appealed, fearing that the Arab men would not tolerate a woman's defiance as well as an Englishman might.

The Arabs reacted to my protest rather more favourably than expected—they all fell about laughing as they watched me struggle with two hands to keep the sword in the air. 'I've been stampeded, lied to, hypnotised and

kidnapped...twice!’ I was forced to lower the tip of the weighty sword to the floor, so I changed my grip to hold it as one would a cricket bat. ‘I am not giving up on Ashlee now!’

The Arab leader motioned to his men to retrieve the weapon from me, and with all my male companions firmly restrained, several of the dark warriors closed in on me.

I began to feel a little woozy; I hadn’t had much to eat recently. Then, my lightheaded and hauntingly sensual giddiness turned to strength and confidence. I raised the Saracen sword with the greatest of ease and wielded it around myself with complete familiarity. Then words began to gush forth from my mouth in the Arab dialect, and even more astounding was the fact that I understood every word. ‘I am Albe-Ra, guardian of this mount and servant to the great goddesses of the Elohim. It is by their command that you will release those trapped in the temple of the Star-Fire or perish on this sword.’

‘Oh, my goodness.’ Cingar was stunned.

‘What?’ My Lord Devere was totally out of his depth, unable to believe his wife’s show with the sword, nor the foreign dialect that I was suddenly sprouting. ‘What did she say?’

‘She claims to be Albe-Ra,’ the gypsy informed him, as bemused as the Arabs were by the idea.

‘What!’ My husband nearly had a fit! ‘First, my Lady Devere is hypnotised by a vampire, and now she is possessed by a six-hundred-year-old ghost! Could it be Molier again? He could be trying to get us all killed!’

‘I doubt very much Molier would claim to be Albray Devere,’ Malory said. ‘They were arch-enemies.’

‘Kill her,’ decided the Arab leader. ‘For abusing the name of the great one.’

My husband struggled to free himself as I stepped up to fight several of our captors. ‘For god’s sake, Susan, please!’

In all likelihood I would have refrained, had I had any control over my limbs. I could scarcely believe the precision and ease with which I fended off my attackers and I felt not the slightest fear for my safety. I even managed to disable my opponents with superficial limb injuries.

‘Albe-Ra was said to be one of the greatest swordsmen to have ever lived,’ Malory commented to my stupefied husband.

‘Praise god for small mercies,’ Lord Devere mumbled in reply. ‘Or should I say, praise the goddess?’ His eyes remained glued to me, and he suddenly couldn’t help but grin with pride.

Having witnessed ten of his finest warriors vested of their weapons, the Arab leader called for his men to fall back. Removing his cloak, he drew his sword. ‘Only if you can defeat me, shall I concede you are Albe-Ra.’

‘And you will see to my request?’ I demanded.

‘I will permit you to carry out your wishes,’ he allowed.

‘What I wouldn’t give for a pistol right now.’ Lord Devere again tried to pry himself free, which only served to gain him a punch in the stomach.

‘Have a little faith in divine intervention,’ Malory advised, his eyes fixed on the duel.

‘That is easy for you to say. She’s not your wife!’ my lord gasped, winded by the blow.

‘At present, I don’t believe she is your wife.’ Malory’s attention was riveted to the swordfight. ‘But the Lady Devere is, in all likelihood, the most psychically adept among us, which is why the guardian spirit has chosen to work through her.’

‘Just wonderful,’ my lord grumbled. ‘The last thing our family needs is another Ashlee Granville.’

‘On the contrary, the world needs all the Ashlee Granvilles it can get.’ Malory winced as I nearly tripped on my skirt.

Damn dresses! I heard a male voice in my mind. *What is wrong with women wearing trousers anyway?* My heart was thumping nineteen to the dozen as I regained my footing.

‘Come, my lady,’ the Arab said. ‘You are very skilled, but you shall only get yourself killed if you persist.’

‘Better to risk death than to allow a daughter of Isis to perish, and fail in my sworn duty.’ My retort struck a chord with my adversary.

‘You are lying.’ The Arab backed off, just to be sure. ‘The woman in the mount is no daughter of Isis.’

‘I assure you that she is,’ I said. ‘Both the woman, and her husband who is trapped with her, bear the mark to prove it.’

Every Arab in the room gasped, and Cingar too.

‘What?’ Lord Devere was going insane with not being able to understand the proceedings.

The Arab leader lowered his sword to stare deep into my eyes. ‘If you lie, I shall trap all of your people in the mount and release the scarabs to ensure that no trace of you survives.’

‘I thank you.’ I bowed to honour his judgement.

My companions were hauled out of the cave ahead of me. Their anxiety was not eased when Cingar explained the arrangement that had been reached.

‘You know the whereabouts of the secret deposit of *Thummim-Schethiya* buried in the Temple of Hathor?’ I asked the Arab leader, and he appeared truly flabbergasted.

‘I am one of a handful who do.’ He came to a standstill. ‘How do you know of it?’

I smiled and shrugged, as if that was elementary. ‘I am Albe-Ra.’

FROM THE TRAVEL JOURNALS OF MRS ASHLEE DEVERE

The torch on the wall was dimming in the thinning air and I was feeling decidedly lightheaded. My husband and I sat at the base of the pathway and were refraining from speech and movement to conserve what air remained.

I still clutched the Star vial in my hand. The substance had restored life to the son of Gasgon de Guise, and I had suggested consuming this substance as an alternative to abusing the Fire-Stone of his forefathers. Devere had agreed that this was more appropriate. The Star had a history of being fed to men by the priestesses of the Great Mother to enhance their bravery in the face of death, he had said.

My husband cited an incident written of by a priestess, Lillet du Lac, the day before the fall of Montségur in 1244AD. The name of the priestess was all too familiar to me, and I asked how the Sangreal knighthood had come by the journals of such a woman. Apparently, those of her order had been closely allied to many of the secret brotherhoods that were thriving at that time—the Sangrèal included. The priestess, one of the few of her faith who had escaped the siege, had lived out her days at Chateau Blancheford in France, chronicling the events of the time. Most of her writings had been

duplicated and distributed to the Grail brotherhoods for their future reference and safekeeping.

My mind dwelt on the priestess' current spiritual plight, and Albray's, and if I accomplished nothing else in my lifetime, I still had enough of my sensibilities to appeal their cause.

'Where are you going?' Devere whispered as I rose.

'I'll be back,' I assured him. 'But there is something I have to do.'

I knelt underneath the centre of the large chamber's golden dome, surrounded by the four pillars depicting the key goddesses of the Elohim, and bowed my head to pray for the first time in my life.

In the name of the Mother, I held both hands to my forehead; the daughters, I covered my heart and then my womb; and the holy ghost, I held my hands together in front of the light centre of my solar plexus ...It has always been difficult for me to place my trust in any being apart from myself, but during this quest I have developed a glimmer of understanding of the source of my rare gifts. Ladies of the Elohim, I thank you for choosing me to continue your tradition and purpose here on earth, and I am indebted to you for your aid and support. However, I have one more request to ask of you and that is that you release the knight Albray from your service and allow him to move on to a better stage of existence, where he might finally find a happy and prosperous life.

It is not a curse of our design that keeps Albe-Ra in our service.

I raised my eyes to perceive a ghostly apparition: an Eastern woman attired in a long, flowing black robe. *Lillet*, I wondered, although the comely woman's attire and free-flowing black ringlets reflected a warmer climate and less prudish eras than the Middle Ages.

The glowing apparition shook her head. *I am one of her kin, as I am one of yours.*

She spoke to me in perfect English, and yet echoing below this I also heard another dialect whispered—my mind was translating her discourse.

And I can assure you that all your foremothers together could not release our knight from what he feels is his duty, for he has a score to settle. I'm afraid there is no dismissing him before certain matters are laid to rest.

Molier. My heart sank. I'd come so close to destroying Molier today. Albray must have been devastated to discover that even a daughter of the blood as psychically adept as I could not vanquish the creature that was

stifling his future existence. Was my failing him the reason he would not come to my aid now?

I believe you know our knight better than to entertain such a notion... the lady of spirit sought to put my mind at rest. It was not your destiny to free Albray, but to return our treasures to their resting place. You aided Albray to complete half his chosen mission.

I was finding it difficult to focus on the lady. Her presence was becoming blurred. *But when will the other half be fulfilled?*

One of our future daughters will aid our favourite son to final victory, she assured me with a smile. *Pass on all the knowledge you have gained during your quest and rest assured that Albe-Ra will discover, just as you have, that love always finds a way.*

But—I lost my balance and crashed to the ground, feeling unconsciousness taking hold.

‘Ashlee!’ I heard my husband cry. ‘The gateway is opening! We’re saved!’

A gust of fresh air washed over me, but it was not enough to keep me from my slumber.

LESSON 23

SUPERCONDUCTORS

‘Damn you, Ashlee!’ I glanced over the journal page that followed. It was an epilogue detailing the events that occurred after my foremother’s return to England. The text made no further reference to her dialogue with the mysterious female apparition about Albray’s future, and it did not seem to mention anything about the other mysteries contained within the Star-Fire Temple.

Am I the future daughter to whom the spirit lady referred? I pondered this momentarily but, as I was still very much in the mindset of my great-great-grandmother, I decided to rephrase the question. ‘I am the daughter to whom the lady referred,’ I stated surely. For who could possibly love Albray more than I? Lillet, perhaps? Ashlee’s account of the personal discussions she’d had with our knight seemed to imply that his relationship with the priestess was more one of deep respect and obligation. Even Lillet herself had claimed that Albray was in love with me! I hated to think that I could not solve this dilemma; that it would fall to some future daughter of the blood to release Albray at last. I felt too much for him to allow him to suffer any longer.

I looked at the clock on my computer to discover that it was now past midday. I was running out of time to find a stone through which I might summon Albray back to my counsel. I had learned much from Ashlee’s account about how Molier might be bested. Molier’s demise was the key to freeing Albray from his vow to my foremothers, that was now clear. And yet, my knight had done all within his power to prevent me from opening the gateway for Molier. Was his concern for my welfare so great that he would deny himself his only shot at freedom out of concern for my safety and wellbeing?

I felt suddenly suffocated by the overwhelming emotions the realisation stirred in me. All that time Albray had spent complaining about my lack of psychic expertise might have been in order to protect me. There

was also a distinct possibility that it was the treasures within the temple that he ultimately sought to protect. The thought brought my runaway sentiments back into check.

It didn't matter either way; the point was that I loved him. I could finish Ashlee's journal at some later date. It was time for me to turn all the knowledge I had gained in the past few days into a plan. 'The first thing I need is a stone.'

I headed outside to begin my search, when the sound of helicopters approaching sent a chill through my body. There was enough time to have the grand opening of the gateway this afternoon and the team would be eager to test my theory as soon as possible.

I need more time to prepare! I panicked inside. *I have no hope of succeeding without Albray.* My eyes dropped to the ground to scour the rocky landscape for a stone in the form of a ring.

'Mia! I have returned!' Andre spied me searching around a pile of rocks near our campsite. He threw down his hand luggage and approached with arms wide. 'A great day for making history, don't you think?' He indicated the cloudless sky and the hot sun pelting down, before he hugged me tight and kissed both my cheeks.

'Yes, wonderful.' I forced myself to sound enthusiastic, my eyes still scanning the ground.

'Have you lost something?' Andre noted my distraction.

'You could say that.'

'Not to worry.' He embraced my shoulders with one arm and squeezed. 'I feel sure it is nothing compared to what you are about to find.' Andre spotted the huge addition to our campsite. 'What is this?'

'It's Molier's mobile home and office,' I informed him.

'Molier is here!' Andre was so excited that he let me go and headed off toward the container. 'This is fantastic! Come, I must introduce you.' He turned and beckoned me forth.

'We've met, actually.' I declined, remaining where I was.

'This is great.' Andre was referring to Molier's presence. 'Now there will surely be no delays. Today is the day, Mia.' He winked. 'I make you famous!' He strode off and knocked on Molier's door, before I had the chance to suggest that tomorrow might be better.

Tusca Resi opened the door and invited Andre inside.

How much do Molier's associates actually know about him? They all seemed blissfully unaware that he was a centuries-old, shape-shifting, blood-drinking demon.

As the secretary waved to me and I returned the gesture, I considered that perhaps I did wish to see Molier again.

There is no point in having psychic ability if you don't use it! I recalled Albray's words of wisdom.

I held up a finger to Tusca to implore her to hold the door as I ran to join the meeting. *Time to confirm Molier's identity one way or the other.*

Molier met with us around the same table upon which we'd had dinner the night before, but today it had a boardroom function.

'You have the shipment of powder I ordered?' Molier questioned Andre, as I quietly focused my third eye upon Molier's aura.

'*Oui*,' Andre confirmed, a little puzzled, 'but if you were coming for the grand opening, then why did you not bring the crate with you?'

A very good question. My gaze did not waver from Molier, despite my mind wandering. I was finding it much harder to perceive Molier's aura than I had Akbar's this morning—perhaps my energies were too scattered.

'My presence here was a spur-of-the-moment decision...' Molier said '...that I made after arranging the shipment. Clearly, my modes of travel are far speedier than those of your average freighting company,' he joked. 'But the important thing is that the shipment is now here.'

Just what had suddenly inspired Molier to attend the opening? He would have already been aware of my presence on-site when he'd sent the shipment of ORME powder. Had he discovered Albray's presence? That certainly might have inspired him to come to oversee the operation and ensure that his old rival didn't get in the way.

I gave up on trying to scrutinise Molier's aura, as I was far too interested in the conversation. 'How did you manage to get your hands on the hidden cache of ORME that Petrie uncovered in 1904?'

'My family managed to purchase a very small sample of that original cache—' he began.

'But the crate we took possession of is huge!' emphasised Andre.

‘That is because ORME production is now a thriving operation among governments and corporate players who control the gold and PGM supplies.’ Molier grinned.

‘PGMs?’ Andre queried.

‘Platinum Group Metals...traces of which often exist as silvery deposits in gold and are usually extracted from gold to ensure its purity. When the atoms of these metals are set into a high-spin state you get ORME—an Orbitally Rearranged Monatomic Element that is highly superconductive,’ I explained without thinking. It would probably have been better for Molier to believe me ignorant on the subject.

‘You have been doing your homework, Dr Montrose,’ Molier granted. ‘The manufacture is all very hush-hush, of course. ORME was rediscovered in 1996 by a simple farmer, of all people. Once he discovered the superconductivity and other inexplicable, exotic properties of the substance, he planned to go into full-scale public production of the substance and sell it to whoever wanted it. But due to the great potential of this substance for all manner of research into fuel cells, anti-gravity, DNA and nanotechnology, the original rediscoverer of ORME was regulated out of existence by certain government departments. The farmer had been warned that if certain corporations weren’t a secret partner in selected ventures the project would never be allowed to go ahead.’

‘You wouldn’t happen to own one of those said corporations, would you, Mr Molier?’ I asked, but the man only smiled in response.

‘The small sample of the original substance found by Petrie has served to confirm that we have indeed rediscovered the mysterious miracle substance that made the ancients and their structures so mighty,’ Molier concluded.

‘Then what are we waiting for, let’s do it!’ Andre rose from his chair, eager to finally bring this excavation to a conclusion.

Molier’s phone rang and was answered by Tusca, who, upon discovering the caller, immediately handed the phone to Molier.

‘Yes?’ He listened intently to what the caller had to say. ‘Very good.’ He passed the phone back to his secretary. ‘That was Conally.’ Molier’s partner had returned to the site with Andre. ‘The crate is unloaded, so we should be good to go in half an hour.’ He handed Andre a headset equipped with a mini-camera and a microphone. ‘Good luck.’ Molier took up his

remote and switched on the large screen mounted inside a wall cabinet behind him to check that the camera was operational. 'I shall be watching with great anticipation.'

Prior to our dismissal, I had again centred my focus on Molier's light-body. I managed to perceive his aura, which emitted a rather lovely silvery light. His chakras I could not perceive at all—they were not bogged with darkness—and nor could I see spinning vortexes of light. They were simply invisible to psychic vision. I turned my focus to Andre, who was the same, and Tusca also. Was my ability failing? From what I had learned, this could only be the case if my love for Albray was fading, and I knew in my heart that this was not the case.

I headed across camp toward my tent, wondering what the hell was going on. Ashlee had described Molier's aura as golden, whilst his chakras were bogged with blackness—I saw no such darkness and an aura of silver. Was one of us wrong in our perception, or had the appearance of Molier's light-body changed between Ashlee's time and the present? If so, what could have caused such an alteration?

ORME, I answered myself. *Molier had had access to the Fire-Stone prior to his confrontation with Ashlee. It was only more recently that the Highward Fire-Stone had come into his possession.* I recalled Molier mentioning DNA technology among the many applications for ORME's use. *What effect might a few doses of the Star substance have had on Molier's mutated DNA?*

I only had half an hour in which to find a treasure stone and summon Albray back to my side, and I honestly didn't fancy my chances of achieving the goal. I felt more compelled to get on the internet and find out more regarding the healing properties of ORME. I had to know exactly what I was dealing with, if I was to fare any better against Molier than my foremothers had.

When I punched 'ORME' into my search engine I was surprised by the number of references it produced. The website which caught my attention was that of the discoverer of the substance. Having been done out of his patent on the exotic matter, he might have a little more to say about the potential of the substance than any corporations investigating its varied uses. Not to be dispossessed so easily, the said farmer that Molier had

mentioned earlier had published a series of lectures on his discoveries. I read down his list of researches: fuel cell technology, anti-gravity, teleportation, parallel dimensions, space-time manipulation, micro-transistors and nanotechnology, all of which incited my interest. I had no time to pursue any of this, and looked instead for any information on DNA and vampires.

Naturally, I did not find any reference to how this substance might affect the DNA of a vampire. However, the claim that the Highward Fire-Stone could dismantle a short-length helix of DNA and then rebuild it led me to wonder if it could have corrected Molier's melatonin imbalance. If it had, Molier now had immortality without any major side effects, so why was he still so eager to unlock and toy with this deadly Ark? Was the attraction the prestige of going where no modern man had gone before, or was there something else about the Ark that was a factor—what it contained, for example?

Until recently, I had always thought that there had only been one Ark, which had housed the Ten Commandments, but now that I gave this some serious consideration it really made little sense. As Ashlee had observed so early in her tale, the Commandments were very similar to a prayer in the Egyptian Book of the Dead: for instance, 'I have not killed' was changed to read 'Thou shalt not kill', and so on. Why would these Commandments warrant the construction of a supernatural golden coffer? As I was certainly no expert on the subject, I thought I'd best expand upon my knowledge rather quickly.

Another search on the net revealed that the two-Ark theory was not as obscure or unpopular as I had imagined. There were many biblical references that could be read to imply that more than one Ark had been fashioned on this mount. One, the Ark of the Covenant, housed the Tables of Testimony—this Ark had allegedly come into the possession of St Bernard during the first crusade. These Tables of Testimony were said to have contained the sacred geometry that became the foundation of the Masonic movement, and the Order of the Children of Solomon used this geometry in creating the great Gothic cathedrals of France. It was certainly true that this order of Solomon did acquire unique knowledge after the return of the Templars from their excavation of the Temple of Solomon. So, what became of this Ark? The legend was that in order to protect the sacred

knowledge from falling into the hands of the Inquisition, the Ark containing the Tables of Testimony was sent back to the Plane of Shar-on, utilising specific aspects of the geometry which had been incorporated into Chartres Cathedral at that time. This cosmic architecture was then dismantled, so that the retrieval of the Ark of the Covenant was impossible.

The second Ark was said to contain the Ring of Testimony. This ancient treasure was a ring of supernatural power, which King Solomon had passed down through many generations of his line. The ring was said to take the form of a ruby coil and it granted the wearer knowledge of all that man had ever known and would ever know. One theory was that the ring had been given to Moses by El Shaddai—which in modern Bibles was wrongly translated to ‘God Almighty’ or ‘Yahweh’. Still, I knew El Shaddai was a Semitic term that related to the Great Mountain Lord and Mesopotamian god, Enlil. Genesis says that Melchizedek, King of Salem, was a priest of this god, and his warriors were still guarding sacred treasures in his name. ‘Interesting reading, Miss Montrose?’

My shock caused me to swivel around quickly in my chair, and I found myself staring into Molier’s eyes. ‘So, it is true then...you have taken the ORME substance?’ A safe assumption considering that he had just walked across the complex in broad daylight.

‘Indeed I have, and it has proven most beneficial,’ he granted politely.

‘So why the need to lie to me?’ I asked.

‘An invalid is always less threatening than an able-bodied man, I find. People always tend to underestimate, and even pity, you.’ He smiled winningly. ‘How long did you grant me the benefit of the doubt, over your beloved Albray?’

A pang of fear reverberated through my body in that instant. Any doubt I might have had about this man was snatched from me, leaving me mentally naked before the truth. ‘My beloved who?’ I stalled, afraid to attack the threat head-on. Perhaps I could bluff my way back into my safety zone of sceptical disbelief.

Molier only smiled. ‘Come with me, please.’ He beckoned me with one finger.

‘I just need to—’

Molier pulled a gun, ending any hope of thinking through the situation. I was in serious danger, just as Albray had always claimed.

I rose to accompany Molier to the gateway and, in a moment of divine clarity, I took up my bottle of drinking water and took it with me.

‘What are your employees going to think when they see you escorting me at gunpoint?’

Molier chuckled. ‘And I credited you with being intelligent.’

I wanted to hit myself. ‘They have all taken the Fire-Stone substance.’ I concluded that this was why all their auras had appeared the same. ‘And Conally too, I suppose?’

‘You begin to see much,’ he said.

‘What about Marty?’ Our chopper pilot was just your average bloke and I couldn’t imagine him being involved.

‘Marty has just eaten lunch and he’s taking a little nap right now.’

‘You drugged him.’ It seemed Molier had thought of everything. Still, there was at least one member of this expedition that I knew wasn’t a superhuman vampire. I looked about for Akbar, only to note how quiet and deserted the camp was—no sounds of camels moaning, or the clattering of pans and dishes in the mess tent. Had Molier drugged them, too, or were the hired help assembled at the gateway to assist with the opening?

When we arrived at the entrance to the mount and there was only Conally, Andre and Tusca Resi present, I became alarmed. ‘Where are the Bedouins?’

‘We dispensed with their services this morning,’ Tusca informed me. ‘Our work at this site will be done by nightfall.’

‘They left camp this morning?’ After all we’d discussed I couldn’t imagine that Akbar would have just up and left without saying a word.

‘In a manner of speaking,’ Molier granted, ‘yes.’

When the other people present smirked at the response, I was chilled to the core. It seemed all my guardians had been disposed of, and I alone had been left to defend the ancient mysteries and defeat, not one, but four superhuman creatures.

I am not immortal, only a little more resilient than most mortals, Ashlee had observed about herself. And I recalled how my great-great-grandmother’s psychic talents had been enhanced by the consumption of the Star substance.

I eyed the spraying device in which the sample of ORME had been stored for easy application to the gateway. I scanned over all I had learned

in the last few days, trusting that the right advice to aid my current predicament would be forthcoming.

Your ancestors are very powerful spirits, Ashlee's old gypsy spirit guide had told her the first time they'd met. You shouldn't be afraid to summon them to your aid. They will come, you will see.

Could I do it? And Ashlee was one of those mighty foremothers now. She'd know what to do—not only that, but she had the psychic aptitude to execute such a plan.

*I call upon Ashlee Devere whose wisdom has served me true.
Enter my being in this time of need, That I should accomplish all
that you would have me do.*

So, I was not as eloquent at summoning the powers-that-be as Ashlee had been. I felt no great presence overcome me and immediately the cynic in me began to wonder whether I was deluding myself about my ancestry.

Meanwhile, Andre had taken the nozzle of the ORME spraygun in hand. 'Here goes everything,' he advised, and aiming it at the gateway he squeezed the trigger.

Light-filled particles squirted forth and due to the heat emanating off the round gateway, the luminous specks stuck to the supermetal. It began to erode the previously unscratchable substance. '*Fantastic!*' Andre cheered the unbelievable occurrence.

When he was just about done with the coating, a gust of wind erupted from nowhere and dusted me with a thick dose of the exotic matter, which I inhaled deeply.

'You idiot!' Molier scolded. 'I told you to keep it away from her!'

'It's not my fault!' Andre protested. 'I don't control the winds.'

For a moment I was blinded by a great burst of internal light. I staggered about, trying to see beyond the illumination. My heart welled to overflowing with love, which could not compare to any earthly feeling I had ever had—not even for Albray. I was touching heaven, for surely only in the celestial realm could one find such pure peace, contentment and fearlessness.

When my vision returned I was entirely focused within my third eye. Now I could see straight through to the dark souls of those in my company,

and wrapped around every one of their light-bodies were hideous unearthly creatures. Albray had expressed to Ashlee his fear that Molier might have been calling upon lower-world intelligences to enhance his psychic skill. This was how he'd managed to block their chakras from my sight; the creatures were performing the function of a psychic shield.

Then I saw her. A woman with wild auburn hair that was bound back in a braid. Her eyes glistened like emerald jewels, enhanced by the deep green velvet garments she wore. The sword and pistol that hung from the belt at her waist made her look very much the warrior. All the time I had been reading her tale, I had never realised how much I wanted to be like her, until now.

Ashlee?

You called? She smiled at me.

I'm in trouble, I bethought her as, in a flash of light, the gateway into the mountain opened.

No, Ashlee assured me, sporting a confident grin. *It is your captors who are in trouble. May I?* She referred to my body, requesting permission to enter it.

I was hardly going to protest. *Be my guest.*

This woman was far more self-confident than I was—far more comfortable with her psychic gifts. She looked at Tusca Resi first and immediately tuned into her subject's inner thought, searching for that which Tusca did not want known. To me this process sounded like dialling up and down a radio bandwidth—yet not only sound but also images flashed through my mind. Ashlee honed in on a vision of Akbar and his two young companions being held at gunpoint at the edge of the mountain's sheer cliff—they had all been badly beaten.

Tusca alone did this? But of course, taking the Star-Fire substance would have enhanced her strength tenfold.

She had made the mistake of firing upon the boys first, and Akbar had seized the opportunity to jump from the cliff. Tusca had looked down into the rocky canyon below but failed to see where the body had fallen.

She fears that she did not properly complete the task Molier gave her. Ashlee knew and so did I.

I was shoved forward to the round gateway to descend the path of red gold, just as Lillet, Lord and Lady Hamilton and Ashlee had done before

me.

‘I can’t believe you would betray me like this, Andre,’ I said. He was just behind me, to my right.

‘It seems we all have our little secrets, Mia,’ he replied coolly, ‘but some of us are better at hiding them.’

‘What is the sack for?’ I queried, having noted the item that he had tossed over one shoulder.

He may have replied, but the shock of seeing the pile of bones at the bottom of the pathway numbed all my senses for a moment. *Albray!* My heart centre jumped into my throat to choke me, and tears began to well.

Do not mourn for him, Ashlee advised. Today we will set him free. She sounded very confident about that.

‘My dear? Who?’ Molier reminded me that I had denied any knowledge of the knight, which served to hurry me past the pile of bones.

By the time we reached the central platform beneath the dome of gold, Conally had flipped the switch that flooded the canals, and I glanced back to note that Andre was bagging Albray’s bones. ‘What is Andre doing?’

‘Just a little insurance in case you decide to be difficult.’ Molier shoved me in the direction of the white-pillared annexe.

‘I have every intention of opening the second gateway for you,’ I advised him. Akbar had made it very clear that it was the only way to be rid of Molier. ‘You have no need to disturb the dead.’

‘Ah...dead but not buried,’ Molier commented. ‘Albe-Ra has proven more problematic dead than he was alive! But I happen to be acquainted with a few djinn who would be quite happy to help me in damning this hindrance to density for all eternity. He shall never again come back to haunt me.’

Djinn was the Arab name for lower-world intelligences and I was not the only one who was alarmed by the threat; even Ashlee hadn’t expected this foul move. ‘I would have thought that Albray was the last soul you’d be wanting to spend all eternity with,’ I chided, knowing Molier’s soul was probably destined for the same fate.

‘I would have to die first,’ Molier retorted as we entered the annexe and the glowing white presence of the Star vial. ‘Once I have possession of both vials, and the Ark and Ring of Testimony therein, death will be of little concern to me.’

‘The ladies of the Elohim will never allow you to claim whatever lies within their Ark.’ I retrieved the vial and held it out to Molier cooperatively.

‘You hang on to it,’ he insisted, seemingly unfazed by my comment. He gestured with his gun for me to exit the annexe.

After I had taken possession of the Fire vial I was escorted to the large oval door that stood opposite the entrance door. Not one of those who had gone before me since the time of Lilith del Aquae had stood upon this precipice.

On either side of the oval door, which appeared to be solid gold, were two hollows, each designed to house one of the vials. Each of these hollows was clearly marked: one with the sign for Fire and the other with the sign for Star, so that no mistake could be made.

‘Wait.’ Molier demanded I refrain from placing the keys in their locks just yet. Andre delivered the sack containing Albray’s bones to Molier, who placed a scroll into the sack before taking possession of it with his free hand.

At the same time, Conally lit the fluid in the canals igniting the liquid.

‘Now leave us,’ Molier advised. ‘There can be only one witness to this event.’

Andre nodded and then looked to me. ‘*Bonsoir*, Mia...it was truly a pleasure knowing you.’

‘Are you planning on dying today?’ I queried, as I certainly wasn’t. I was furious with him, and praised the goddess that I had never been sucked into sleeping with the snake. ‘I’d tell you to go to hell, Andre, but I see you are already well on your way.’

He merely grinned and shook his head, as if I was the one who was deluded. Andre then levitated off the pathway into the air and seemed amused by his ability. He flew off toward the entrance to join his comrades.

‘Feel free to go ahead.’ Molier granted me leave to unlock the gateway to the inner chamber. ‘And I warn you, the curse to damn your beloved knight is inside this sack with him. I need only burn them together for his fate to be sealed.’ He held the sack out over one of the canals.

‘I keep trying to tell you, Molier. I believe as much as you do that you deserve to have whatever lies beyond this door.’ I placed the Star in its keyhole and then moved to the other side of the door. ‘However, if you in any way harm those bones, I shall personally see you to hell.’ I shoved the

Fire vial into position. The door vanished to reveal a small connecting chamber that held a golden breastplate, a copper bowl and pitcher, and two more keyholes.

‘Aha!’ Molier cried with glee. ‘All the legends were true. Now take the vials and place them on the ground near the breastplate, then return to where you are,’ he demanded of me, still threatening to feed Albray’s bones into the flames.

I did as he instructed, feeling that I was running out of time to play my hand. Still, I was not prepared to sacrifice Albray in the process. I had to get that sack out of Molier’s possession.

‘Give me the sack,’ I requested, standing aside so that Molier could enter the tiny inner chamber, the aim of his gun fixed firmly upon me.

The beast wrapped around the man’s light-body laughed to mock my request, alerting me to Molier’s intent.

The second he attempted to cast the sack toward the pit Ashlee aided me to will it into my hands. Molier fired his weapon and I felt each bullet as it impacted with my chest. My body, in shock, was numb to the pain as I hit the ground, clutching the remains of my beloved. He was safe now and that was all that really mattered to me.

Mia, you must get up! Ashlee was urging me, and in my delirium I saw her standing outside me once again. The impact of the bullets must have cast her from my being. *There is still a chance you can prevent Molier from gaining control of the Ark and its treasures, but he must not enter the inner sanctum alone.*

I rolled over onto all fours, and clutching the sack against my wounds with one hand, I used the other to crawl toward the door of the connecting chamber. Both my physical and etheric sight were blurred, yet I managed to make out Molier, now wearing the breastplate of gold. He had dismissed the djinn from his being and my guess was that he could not contain the lower-world intelligence whilst wearing the sacred armour.

Shoes.

Ashlee reminded me to remove them, which I did, as Molier placed the Fire vial into a keyhole. I noted that his feet were now bare. He must have washed them in the copper bowl provided. It was a struggle to remove the water bottle strap from over my head, but once I achieved the feat, I doused both my feet in the cool water.

Now go.

Having placed the Star vial in its keyhole within the connecting chamber, the next door vanished and without so much as a sideways glance, Molier entered the Ark chamber, having retrieved both vials to take with him.

I suppressed my gasp of awe on sighting the inside of the Ark chamber. One golden red pathway led to a central ringed platform, around which was a sea of the same flammable fluid that filled the canals in the outer chamber. The walls were of highly polished gold, as were the several large pillars that supported the roof of the chamber and the inverted golden dome above. The unusual dome hung above the central platform and mirrored the entire chamber, in the centre of which was a golden box. The box was about approximately 115 cm in length by about 70 cm in height and from its reflection it appeared to be as thick as it was tall. A band of hieroglyphs went around the sides of the box, and bordering each corner of the Ark was a leg support of rich polished timber. I suspected this was the shittim wood or ‘incorruptible wood’ of which the Ark was constructed, according to biblical accounts. What did differ from the Bible’s account of the divine instrument were the adornments on the golden lid or ‘mercy seat’, as there were no golden cherubim with their wings outstretched toward each other. Instead, two metal points rose up out of the lid, and these curved inwards toward each other. To me these odd features seemed very reminiscent of electrical conductors, and in fact the Ark appeared not unlike one huge battery.

Molier had walked around behind the Ark and had knelt down. When he arose once more there were two golden chains attached to the breastplate that he wore.

This seemed to be a clear hint that I needed to secure myself to something. I dragged myself toward the golden stand on which the breastplate had been placed and wrapped an arm about its base, which was embedded in the floor.

Molier laughed as he spied me preparing to bear witness to his victory. ‘Holding on will not save you now, Miss Montrose. There can be only one witness to this event, and as it is I who has the protection of the breastplate, the power of the Elohim is now mine.’

He placed the Star vial and the Fire vial in the two conductors atop the Ark and as soon as they were housed correctly, a current of electricity erupted between them. Then an arc of light formed between the vials. The contents of the two vials drained into the interior of the Ark.

Molier, pleased by the unfolding events, lit a match and tossed it into the fluid surrounding the central platform. The temperature in the room rose dramatically, and the lid on the golden box slowly lifted into the air and began to spin around. A coiled red ring levitated into the space between the Ark and its mercy seat, and the ring began to glow as the spinning lid produced a great whirlwind. Sparks of light began to shoot out from the glowing mass that had manifested around the ring.

Molier seemed unaffected by the conditions in the chamber. The chains prevented him from being blown away, and the shooting sparks of light rebounded off the breastplate. He reached for the ring.

A powerful burst of energy, as deafening as it was bone-shattering, ripped me from my anchor. I clutched the sack of bones to me, so that if we landed in the flames, we'd be damned together. Rocketing backward, I collided with the wall.

I was unconscious before my body hit the floor; all I was aware of was the light.

The coolness of the hard surface against my bare cheek and fingertips was the first thing I felt. Upon raising myself a little, I discovered that I'd been laid out on a floor of pure gold. But there was no such floor in the Star-Fire Temple, so where was I now? Wherever I was, my sack of bones was right alongside me and that morbid fact was very comforting.

I got to my knees and, as the floor was so polished, I could see my reflection. There was no sign of my injuries. I ran my hands over my torso to confirm the wounds had gone—there weren't even any holes in my shirt where the bullets had penetrated! *Could I have ascended to the Plane of Shar-on?* Or was I just...dead? I could also be dreaming, but the event was so real that it felt more like an astral experience.

This round chamber was similar to the Ark chamber, only larger and grander, with huge columns of white gold and walls of yellow gold. The dome overhead was glass, or perhaps crystal, and beyond it was a bright sea of stars. It was unlike any view of space that I had seen in my travels on Earth. Seven thrones crafted from precious metals and stones sat before me

in a semi-circle, all so highly polished that they sparkled and emitted an otherworldly glow. Between myself and the thrones was the Ark, its Mercy Seat spinning above it, and the Ring of Testimony still poised in midair glowing with pink brilliance.

An utterance and rattling sound alongside me drew my attention. There was Molier, still trapped in the breastplate that was chained to the floor. He was cursing under his breath, as he could not seem to get his chains to unfasten. 'This is a cock-up of cosmic proportions!' He looked at me and, although agitated, he was not fearful. 'You shouldn't be here...and neither should I! You should have perished, and I should be back on Earth wielding the divine power and knowledge of the gods!'

'Well, I guess all those scribes and prophets through the ages, whose knowledge your brotherhoods have managed to buy or steal, didn't know everything...or at least they never recorded the entire truth for prosperity.' As I stood up, seven women appeared before the seven thrones and seated themselves. They were all identical in appearance and dress.

The women were clearly Egyptian and clothed in tight-fitting silver garments that fell from beneath their exposed breasts; the straps going around their necks were crowned with silver wing-like necklaces. Only the centre female wore the traditional headdress of Hathor—bull horns with a sun-disc in between—and carried her staff of power. These must be the seven faces of Hathor, the seven goddesses of destiny, who constituted the grand council of the ladies of the Elohim.

'What is the meaning of this!' Molier challenged the council, frustrated that he could not break free of his bonds. 'I have won possession of your Ark and its gifts without question. The porthole between our worlds should have been shut down!'

'Only if the Ark detects a stronger negative than positive influence in its presence will the gateway be destroyed.' The woman wearing the headdress of Hathor spoke on behalf of them all. 'Clearly this was not the case in this instance.' She motioned to me.

'She should have perished, for I wear the breastplate,' Molier persisted.

'It is only men that require protection from our Ark. And as you have brought a challenger to our realm with you, it would seem a contest is in order.'

Molier looked to me, insulted by the suggestion. 'This girl is hardly any match for me in battle,' he scoffed, confident of a win.

'Our daughter has brought forth a champion who wishes to fight on her behalf.' The goddess drew our attention to the sack beside me, which had begun to wriggle.

My heart stopped beating as a skeleton rose out of the sack.

'Albray?' I uttered, mortified, and the skull on top of the bones nodded.

'Oh dear,' commented the goddess. 'This will never do.' She pointed the jewel on the head of her staff at what remained of the knight. A light-beam passed through the levitating ring to produce an even more powerful ray which collided with the skeleton. The process of bodily erosion began to reverse, and organs, body tissue, veins and finally skin, reconstituted.

My horror turned to elation to see my knight as alive as he'd appeared in my dreams—he was also buck naked.

The goddess smiled in approval. 'Much better.'

'That's hardly fair...he's dead!' Molier objected to his arch-rival's resurrection.

'And you should have died centuries ago,' the goddess decreed. 'The challenge seems perfectly fair.'

It took a moment for Albray to realise his circumstances. 'Ladies of the Elohim, it would be my honour to rip this beast apart with my bare hands. However, I would prefer it if the rest of me was clothed.'

The head of the council pouted in protest as she considered whether to grant the knight's request. 'It seems a great shame to cover such a work of perfection.'

I had to admit that I agreed wholeheartedly.

'Ladies, *please* can we get on with this,' Molier appealed, exasperated.

'Are you in a hurry to die?' Albray asked as, with a thump of Hathor's staff on the floor, my knight was supplied with a pair of trousers just like the ones he usually wore. The rest of him was left naked—a nice compromise on the goddess' behalf, I considered.

The golden breastplate that had been restraining Molier vanished, along with all his clothing bar his trousers.

'Now you are truly on equal terms,' Hathor was pleased to announce. 'Let the battle for our Ark and its treasures begin.'

‘Wait a moment,’ I protested, unfamiliar with the terms of such a contest. ‘What will become of the loser of this duel?’

‘The fate of the loser is decided by the victor,’ the Great Mother informed me.

That was what I was afraid of. I turned to Albray, feeling responsible for the position he was now in. ‘When I saved your bones it was to divert the fate Molier would sentence you to. I didn’t realise I was awarding him a second chance to have his way.’

Albray took my hands in his to reassure me. ‘I have waited many centuries to atone for my failure in life, and I am indebted to you, Mia, for securing me the chance to end my curse.’ He looked at Molier.

‘The feeling is mutual, Devere,’ our adversary retaliated.

‘No need to ask by what manner of contest you both desire this challenge to be resolved.’

‘By the sword,’ both men replied in unison, as they glared at each other.

‘So be it. Let the Wheel of Fate take combat form to decide this,’ the central goddess decreed, thumping her staff twice on the floor.

LESSON 24

WISDOM

My perspective shifted and I found myself seated on one of the seven thrones of Hathor. Then the chamber morphed just as suddenly into a large sunken arena over which the seven thrones presided.

The floor of the arena was comprised of three large flat rings that were set one within the other around a flat central disc; together they formed one huge circular platform of pure gold. This platform seemed to float in space as the area between the combat floor and the high walls of the sunken arena vanished and fell away into a bottomless, dark abyss.

I looked at the goddess alongside me to discover that she had transformed into the green-clad persona of Ashlee Granville. Beyond Ashlee, the manifestation of Hathor retained her central position in the council. To the other side of the goddess were three other women in nineteenth-century dress, each one a little older in appearance than the next.

‘The youngest woman is my dear friend, Lady Susan Devere.’ Ashlee answered my query before I’d even thought to ask.

‘She is just as I imagined from your description.’ I smiled as I realised that all the women present must be daughters of the blood, all intimately involved in the outcome of this battle. ‘Next to Susan must be Clarissa, Lord Hereford’s wife. And next to her, the Dowager Countess Cavandish, Lady Charlotte.’

‘It seems all my descriptions were accurate.’ Ashlee motioned to my other side, where a woman clad in red was seated. She appeared a lot like Lilith in appearance and for a moment her identity had me stumped. ‘Lilith del Aquae?’ It finally clicked who this seventh woman was, and she smiled graciously and nodded. ‘But where is Lilith?’

‘She has never assumed her place on the council,’ Ashlee told me. ‘She will not let go of her guilt. She feels she is responsible for Albray’s self-imposed curse. She has bound herself to the astral realm closest to the

physical in order to help him. Hence, Lillet resides many planes below the vibrational frequency of the realm where the Elohim reside.'

'Still, she should be here,' I insisted, unsure as to whether I was annoyed at the council, or Lillet.

'Only when Albray is free will Lillet move on.' Ashlee put my query to rest.

Hathor stood to address the men in the arena below, and a weapon manifested in each man's hand. As the swords were the very ones the two men had used in their confrontation in the temple nearly eight hundred years ago, Molier and Albray were comfortable with the arrangement. 'The winner will gain his freedom and sovereignty of our Ark.' The goddess seated herself before she announced. 'Begin!'

The first clash of swords was immediate, as Molier rushed forward, his weapon thrashing backwards and forwards in a frenzied rush. Yet Albray was not easily overpowered and fought Molier off, thrusting him back.

As the two men circled each other, the sound of metal detaching from metal was heard and the outside ring of the Wheel of Fate began to tilt and spin. This event nearly threw Albray off-balance as one of his feet had been resting on the ring. He raised his foot and swiftly regained his equilibrium as Molier took advantage and attacked.

The next time the detaching metal sound was heard, the outside ring stilled and the one inside it began to move. This development cast Molier off-balance and he slid away from Albray onto the outside ring, where only some fancy footwork prevented him from falling into the dark oblivion beyond. Molier jumped the spinning ring to return to the central disc where Albray awaited him.

'You're not getting away that easily.' Albray lashed out with his weapon, and was clearly overpowering Molier until a metal sound gave warning of a change in conditions. The central disc began spinning and tilting, and both men jumped backwards, narrowly avoiding metal spikes that shot up to form a deadly bed of blades.

This is a nightmare! I decided. *Hasn't Albray got enough to contend with?*

'The Wheel of Fate is unbiased.' The goddess addressed my unspoken protest.

‘It is also inhumane,’ I said. ‘I assumed that on higher planes of awareness such bloodsports would have been abolished, and a better way to resolve such differences would have been devised.’

‘The arena you see is not in physical existence. This battle is being played out on a subconscious level. But as armed combat is how these men have always wished to settle this centuries-old dispute, I have obliged their fantasy,’ the goddess said.

‘Albray and Molier.’ Ashlee shook her head to imply they were hopeless. ‘Their souls still belong to a thirteenth-century consciousness, and deep down they are still warrior knights. The real test of the Ark is for them to ascend beyond their current understanding.’

‘But Albray has progressed spiritually through his experience of other eras,’ I argued and Ashlee nodded to agree.

‘The big question is, just how far he has progressed?’

As I observed the challenge in progress, I had to concede that such a contest was probably every warrior’s dream.

‘Every soul has its Day of Judgement,’ Hathor informed me, ‘and each soul that resolves to take the path of light contributes to universal consciousness. By the time every human soul has chosen the higher path, every child born on Earth will have incarnated into the bloodline of Isis and all shall share in the ascension of the species.’

‘What would happen if Molier were to win?’

‘Molier cannot win without losing,’ the Great Mother explained. ‘Any more than he can lose without winning.’

‘I don’t understand,’ I freely admitted, to beg more information. ‘You speak as if you know the outcome of the battle already?’

‘I do,’ the goddess replied, amused that I could think otherwise. ‘One of these men desires to evolve more than the other.’

‘Are you saying that the loser stands to gain more than the winner?’ I struggled to make sense of the conversation.

At that moment Molier’s sword was sent flying over the edge of the Wheel of Fate, which ceased its activity. Molier was left defenceless at the end of Albray’s blade.

‘Mercy.’ Molier dropped to his knees and managed to stall the death blow with his appeal—eight hundred years of life and he was still not ready to face death. ‘I ask you, is it my fault that I was not born of the blood?’

Whereas you, Albe-Ra, were born the Shining One, automatically granting you access to the inner circle behind the brotherhoods. How else but through the conquest of the Arks was I ever to gain such privileges?' There was no fear underlying his plea, no humbleness or respect.

'If your soul had been ready, you would have been born into the line of Isis.' Albray was not going to be swayed by such tactics. 'Do you not see that presuming to play god as you have has only delayed your true aspirations?'

Molier frowned as he momentarily considered this, but rather than discuss the premise further or admit to any wrongdoing, decided to revert to his own defence and direct the blame for his plight back on Albray. 'I would not have abused the ambrosia of the gods for so long if you hadn't trapped me in the temple. I didn't realise that my soul would be trapped within my body as a result!'

'Sion's teachings warned that there would be consequences for abusing the birthright of the holy line,' Albray argued. 'Every knight is taught that.'

'But what those consequences would be was never disclosed. Do you know what it's like to have a soul that functions purely on a physical level? I cannot experience emotion. I have only the instinct to survive. I can feed my intellect with knowledge but higher wisdom shall always elude me. I endured six hundred years in the dark airlessness of that temple ...*six hundred years!* And if I cannot claim the Ring of Testimony then I face an eternity of spiritual darkness, whether I am dead or alive.'

Albray struggled against his desire to sever Molier's head from his shoulders—his rival's lack of emotion was vexing him, even though Molier had just explained that he was incapable of feeling. 'You were more than prepared to banish me to the dark abyss.' My knight drew back his weapon, resolved to be done with his curse.

Molier did not flinch in the face of the threat. 'I do not have the benefit of your high spiritual standing,' he stated bluntly 'Are you not Albe-Ra, a prince of light? And if so, surely you are more merciful than a wretch like me?'

For once, Molier was right. 'Kill him and darkness wins,' I stood and yelled down at Albray.

'He cannot hear you,' the goddess informed me.

'But he must hear me,' I protested.

‘Do you not trust that our knight has evolved enough to reach that conclusion on his own?’ Hathor challenged.

‘Of course,’ I realised, and seated myself again. I would place my faith in the soul I had grown to love and trust implicitly.

The longer the death blow was delayed by Albray’s soul-searching, the broader Molier’s insincere smile grew. ‘It is just as I suspected...you have developed a conscience and no longer have the constitution for killing.’

I held my breath, knowing that the observation would be disturbing to any warrior.

‘No, Molier. The difference between you and I is that I always had a conscience...and if you had exercised the same, you would not now be on the border of damnation!’ Albray was riled. ‘But if you are to be damned, you can take responsibility for it.’ My knight cast his weapon into the abyss and relief washed over me as Albray looked to the heavens to appeal. ‘I beseech the great ladies of the Elohim, can this man’s fate not be of his own choosing?’

‘Yes!’ I cheered my knight’s scruples, and looked to she who sat in judgement.

‘It seems that the next chapter of Albray’s tale shall be the start of a whole new book.’ Hathor and indeed all the women seated alongside me were smiling.

It was exciting to know that Albray had secured himself a future. I would have questioned the ladies further, if the outer world of inner self had not suddenly launched my consciousness into a downward spiral. I knew my consciousness was returning to the physical world for it felt like descending to the bottom of the ocean. My body felt suddenly dense and laborious.

I raised myself from the floor where I lay in the doorway to the Ark chamber, to find Molier and Albray standing on either side of the Ark. The Mercy Seat spun over its treasure and the Ring of Testimony glowed invitingly between the two men, right at their eye level.

‘Wait!’ Albray cautioned Molier from taking advantage of the situation too quickly. ‘Look down upon your being.’

Molier was amazed, as was I, to see that his subtle body was freed of its blackness and was pulsating with light.

‘The ladies of the Elohim are awarding you, and the souls you have corrupted, the opportunity to wipe the slate clean and move back into alignment with cosmic law,’ Albray advised Molier. ‘A step forward to take the ring will return you to the eternity of darkness you have been endeavouring to shake for centuries. A step backwards into the flames will return you to the matrix, where you will be assigned to a suitable era in which to further evolve.’

Molier didn’t seem to fancy his options, and he observed Albray with ungrateful eyes.

‘Only through death shall you ever obtain the chance to be reborn of the blood.’

The statement came as something of a revelation to Molier, who had become accustomed to the inevitability that he would never incarnate.

‘This is your chance to prove that you have the moral fibre from which a son of the blood is fashioned.’ Albray spent his last words of wisdom and fell silent to let Molier decide his own fate.

Clearly, it was difficult to be grateful to Albray for this unexpected opportunity and for the first time since I had started following this ancient mystic tale I actually felt for Molier. How difficult would it be to ignore your natural instinct for survival in order to achieve your greatest aspiration?

*Bow down thine ear, and hear the words of the wise, And apply
thine heart unto my knowledge.*

Molier began quoting from the Proverbs of Solomon in an attempt to strengthen his courage and make the decision we all knew he wanted to. Still, his hand was poised before the great ring of power and he had to exercise restraint not to take it.

*Remove not the old landmark; And enter not into the fields of the
Fatherless.*

His fingers recoiled from the temptation.

Better is little with the fear of the Lord, Than great treasure and trouble therewith.

Molier looked to Albray resolutely and held wide his arms.
Albray nodded to assure Molier that his decision was sound.

For riches certainly make themselves wings; They fly away as an eagle toward Heaven.

As my knight completed the verse, Molier allowed himself to plummet backwards into the flaming liquid and his life was extinguished in an instant.

My attention was snatched from the gruesome scene by a throbbing pain in my chest. I placed my hands to my heart to calm my intense emotions. On discovering my shirt was moist and sticky, I looked to find my hands covered in blood. ‘I am dying?’ With that revelation the ground rushed up to meet me.

‘Miss *Montrose*?’ I heard a voice calling to me, although it sounded far away.

I was so peaceful. I wanted for nothing as I held no conscious thought—except to ignore the summons.

‘Mia!’ I was being shaken from my focused-inward bliss and, despite my unwillingness to wake, I recognised the voice calling me. A sharp pang of yearning in my heart spurred me to surface from the sanctuary of my unconscious state.

As I stretched out, I became aware that I was propped up in a seated position against someone and my eyes came to focus on the face of my knight.

‘Albray.’ I turned toward him and held him close. ‘I have died and gone to heaven.’

‘No.’ He pried me from his body and holding my face in his hands he brushed my hair aside and kissed me.

Perhaps this was just a brief interlude on the astral plane, while my fate was being decided. I didn’t care, as long as it lasted.

It took some time for me to exhaust my delight in having my dream lover close and tangible, but as this reality didn't seem to be going anywhere, I drew away. My hands and shirt were still blood-spattered, but my wounds were mysteriously absent. 'This is a dream. You have come to say goodbye.' My heart jumped into my throat and the swelling pressure it caused nearly choked me. 'You are free.' I forced a smile, only to set tears rolling down my face.

'Yes I am,' he confirmed, 'but I rather thought I might hang around for a while.'

I shook my head. 'You've done your time as a guardian spirit and although I shall miss you every time I sleep, I cannot condemn you to that purgatory any longer. You must move on,' I urged, bravely denying my own feelings on the matter.

The look on Albray's face was not gratitude or regret, but a rather odd look that I didn't know how to interpret. 'Well, if that is what you want.' He sat me up, placed the two vials in my hands and stood to depart. 'I was rather hoping that you would show me the ropes of living in the twenty-first century, but if you have other plans then I guess...' He shrugged and then waved to me as he moved toward the exit tunnel.

The vials. I looked to the items in my hand, then to the dark chamber around me. The door to the Ark chamber was closed. I stood up and noted the flat sack lying nearby; the bones were no longer in it. *Albray used the Star substance on me!* It had miraculously healed before, and that was why my wounds had vanished. My consciousness hadn't shifted to Albray's realm of existence, his consciousness had somehow returned to mine! 'The goddess,' I uttered under my breath and an inner voice told me: *I am only complying with the wishes of all involved.*

Albray heard me running after him. He turned to catch me as I overpowered him with a hug. 'I suppose, as I did draw you into this era, the least I can do is make you feel at home.'

'I have never had a home before.' Albray considered the notion, well disposed toward the concept. 'You make me feel like I have finally found one.'

For the first time we kissed and there was no urgency attached—no time, dimension or alternative existence waiting to pry us apart.

'Mia!'

The sound of Andre's voice sent shockwaves through my system. I had forgotten about Molier's three partners in crime.

'What the hell is going on?' he asked as he was accompanied down the path into the Star-Fire Temple at the tip of Akbar's sword. They both looked badly beaten about and rather the worse for wear.

'Thank heavens you're all right.' I conveyed my relief to the Arab. The Frenchman was not happy about this development.

'You're on his side!' Andre protested, genuinely surprised. 'What about me?'

I was about to tell Andre exactly what I thought of him, when it clicked that his subtle body was quite free of darkness.

'He doesn't remember a thing,' Akbar advised. 'Neither do the other two.' He motioned with his head back toward the daylight, where Tusca and Conally were being held by other members of the Melchi brotherhood. 'We had a little trouble bringing them under control, but then all three lost consciousness.' Akbar shrugged.

'Who is this?' Andre motioned to Albray, who was still wearing nothing but his thirteenth-century trousers.

'This is the new man in my life that I've been telling you about,' I informed him and introduced them.

'Did Molier bring you down here?' Andre was suspicious of the stranger being let into the site before Andre himself had been in.

'Molier entered the chamber beyond those doors and did not come back out,' I told him truthfully. 'I fear he has ventured to go where no man ought, and has paid the ultimate price for his defiance.'

'He is dead!' Andre was disturbed by the news, but seemed more worried about the complications this might cause him than about the probable death of Molier. 'That's the trouble with these archaeologists. They are always getting themselves killed before they finalise their bloody accounts...when am I going to learn.' He threw his hands up, then noticed the vials I held. 'What are they?'

'These belong to Akbar.' I moved to hand the keys to him, and when Andre protested, he again felt the tip of the Arab's sword in his back.

'All right, they're yours.' The Frenchman held his arms up in submission. 'I think I'm beginning to understand the situation a little better.'

‘My deepest gratitude, Dr Montrose.’ Akbar sheathed his sword and accepted the vials from me. ‘There are sites more secret than this one where the keys can be stored until their ultimate purpose is revealed to mankind. As long as the keys reside here, the security of the porthole will remain at risk.’

‘I agree.’ It was a relief to hand the keys over to the Order of Melchi, for they were the true custodians, who would not abuse their position as guardians of the vials. ‘Still, this is not the thirteenth century.’ I voiced my only concern. ‘With modern surveillance and tracking systems, how can you be sure that the keys can be delivered to a safe location without some ancient brotherhood creeping out of the woodwork to abscond with them again?’

Both Akbar and Albray were amused, but Albray played ignorant and allowed Akbar to explain. ‘There are places on this Earth that even the most sophisticated machines cannot find and the most ingenious men cannot go, without an invitation.’

‘How do you mean?’ Andre didn’t understand. Neither did I. I wondered if Akbar was being a little naive—Albray most certainly was.

My expression must have reflected my doubt, for Akbar said, ‘If it will reassure you, doctor, why don’t you attempt to track my party when we leave this place? Molier has left the most modern technology at your disposal...use any and all means that you have,’ the Arab challenged us with a winning smile. ‘But first we shall bury this gateway once and for all.’

Albray and myself nodded to second the motion.

‘But it has taken me months to get it open!’ Andre protested. ‘I haven’t even had the chance to look around yet!’

‘Believe me, you don’t want to,’ I advised, accompanying my guardians up the red-gold pathway to the exit.

‘But what about the fame and fortune?’ Andre was reluctant to leave the grand chamber and its walls of glittering gold.

‘The sun is setting,’ Akbar commented to his one-time employer. ‘You could stay here *alone* for all eternity, if you choose.’

Andre, not finding this a very attractive scenario, hotfooted it up the exit path behind us.

Outside, as the sun set, Andre, Conally and Tusca watched in bemusement while a multitude of Arab warriors buried the gateway in dirt and sand with the aid of Andre's dormant excavation machinery. When the job was done the site was pretty much as they had probably found it. A few sirocco storms and no one would ever know that this side of the mountain had been excavated. The Melchi, having completed their chore, abandoned the equipment and took to their horses.

'Just fantastic,' Andre grumbled. 'The most promising dig ever, ruined by some backward cult of thieves!'

'It is you who are the thieves.' Akbar overheard the comment and took offence. The murder of his two young companions was fuelling his resentment. Still, as the offenders had not been in possession of their sensibilities at the time, Akbar had decided not to seek retribution—he knew well enough the power of the creature that had been controlling them. 'If you treasure your lives,' he advised Andre and the others, 'you will be gone by tomorrow noon and you will never return to the Sinai.' Akbar looked at me and all his anger melted away as he approached to say farewell. 'You, on the other hand, doctor...I feel sure we shall meet again.'

I was going to bow politely, or offer him a handshake, but at the risk of offending the man, I embraced him, albeit briefly. 'No offence, Akbar, but I hope you are wrong about that.' I pulled back to find him looking stunned but honoured. 'Thanks for being there to catch my fall.'

'Your death at this time would have been a great loss for humanity.' He accepted my gratitude graciously before turning to Albray. 'Fare thee well, my mysterious friend. I suspect I am more indebted to you than I know.'

'Likewise.' Albray returned the Arab warrior's grin, as they shook hands.

'Take very good care of this woman,' Akbar requested, as I slid under Albray's arm. 'She has a thing for flinging herself off cliffs in the middle of the night.'

Albray looked at me in confusion—the stone had not been in my possession at that time, so of course my knight knew nothing of my near-death experience whilst trying to save the amulet.

'Tell you later.'

‘Mia’s wellbeing is my reason for being,’ Albray assured Akbar, who nodded to wish us both well. If the man had questions he wanted to ask Albray, he refrained and mounted his horse instead.

We watched the hordes depart on horse and camel. ‘You do realise that my fee for this job just tripled,’ I said to Andre.

‘You speak as if the job is over, but we are just getting started.’ Andre winked at me ahead of striding off toward camp.

‘The project just got sabotaged by a local religious sect. Claim it on insurance and move on,’ I suggested, going after Andre to prevent him from picking a fight he would never win without starting a war.

‘I am not going to allow months of work to go to waste!’ Andre quickened his pace and waved forth Conally and Miss Resi. ‘I am taking our cocky Arab friend up on his challenge,’ Andre said. ‘I planted a tracking device on him.’

‘That is not really standard excavation equipment,’ I chided, concerned at the development, as I had seen Molier’s high-tech office.

‘Molier was not your standard archaeologist. He had ways and means.’ Andre did remember that much about his recently deceased employer. ‘I also planted the micro-camera from the headset that Molier gave me earlier.’

‘Good for you.’ Conally was inspired into action. ‘I’ll chase up Marty and we’ll follow the thieving bastards in the chopper.’

‘Here we go again.’ I threw up my hands, exasperated. ‘Do you people never learn?’ My colleagues ignored me as they shifted into hunting mode. I looked back to Albray, to find him having a quiet chuckle.

‘How do you expect them to learn from an experience they cannot remember?’

‘There is that,’ I granted, as my knight caught me up.

‘Not to worry, they shall realise their folly presently.’ Albray took up my hand and kissed it. ‘Shall we retire to your tent and leave them to their wild goose chase?’

I wished that I were as confident that Akbar could not be tracked. ‘It is not that I don’t trust you, or that your proposal is not far more inviting—’

‘I know, you just worry that I am a little old-fashioned and naive,’ Albray said, not insulted, but aware.

‘I need closure.’ I backed up to follow Andre and Miss Resi into Molier’s abode.

‘Suit yourself.’ Albray changed course from my tent to follow me.

‘Let me handle Andre.’ I urged my knight against accompanying me. ‘Your presence will probably just aggravate the situation.’

‘Whatever you think is best.’ Albray kissed me, and reluctantly dragged himself away to resume his course to my tent. ‘I shall find some clothes then, shall I?’

‘No, don’t.’ I grinned, wanting desperately to accompany him back to my tent. But I owed it to Ashlee, Lillet and all my foremothers to see those keys delivered beyond the reach of treasure seekers like Tusca, Conally and Andre.

In Molier’s mobile office, Andre had Miss Resi in the computer hot seat and was shooting orders at her in French.

‘I do know what I’m doing,’ she barked back at him, whilst typing at triple the speed of a normal human being. ‘We should have a visual.’ She hit a final key and a window opened on the desktop screen of the overhead monitor—this featured a bouncing view of the desert, as seen from the right-hand saddlebag of Akbar’s horse.

‘What about the transmitter?’ Andre wanted confirmation that they could track the signal hidden on our target.

Tusca resumed typing nineteen to the dozen, whereupon a second window opened on the overhead monitor. This window contained a radar screen that was reading one solitary flashing dot, slightly left of centre. ‘The target is about half a kilometre from us on a westerly bearing.’

‘*Merci, Mademoiselle Resi.*’ Andre pulled the walkie-talkie from his belt and informed Conally and Marty to head west in the chopper.

‘Even if you do discover where they take the keys, how do you plan on reclaiming them?’ I attempted to reason with my colleagues. ‘Only Allah knows how many of these warriors there are.’

I had never seen Andre truly annoyed at me before, but the dark look on his face told me I was not in favour at present. ‘Well, if you had not given an assassin the keys to our find, I would not have to go looking for them.’

I placed my hands on my hips. After the day I had endured I was not going to become the scapegoat for the failure of this project. 'If I were you, I wouldn't assume to place blame for this affair on *anyone*, until I could explain my own whereabouts at the time. You have nearly cost me my life several times—'

Andre's eyes fell upon the bloodied holes in my shirt. 'Oh, my goddess, Mia. You've been shot!' Of course the Frenchman did not hesitate to seize the opportunity to rip open my shirt, and gasped when he found nothing but smeared bloodstains on my bare belly. 'What the...?'

I was at a complete loss for words. The thought of recounting my tale was completely exhausting to me.

'What happened to us...to Molier?' Tusca humbly appealed. She was as beat up as Andre, and like him could not remember how she had sustained her injuries. I think she sensed that she'd done something horrible that, like a nightmare she couldn't remember, had left her with a deep sense of foreboding.

'You do not want to know.' I began to shake as the recollection of the day's events sent shockwaves pulsing through my being. 'Molier is dead... but as he was ultimately responsible for the murder of Akbar's two young companions—'

Tusca gasped. Maybe she had a recollection of something.

'—I'd say that Christian Molier's demise was karma, and long overdue. I gave the keys to Akbar because the treasures of the gods are dangerous in the hands of ordinary men. Trust me when I warn you that no good will come from pursuing those keys at this time.'

'Andre, are you there?' Conally's voice sounded from the walkie-talkie and startled us all.

Andre fetched up the communicator. '*Oui.*'

'There is a sirocco headed our way. Our Arab friends are heading straight into a towering cloud of dirt! We cannot take the chopper in there... we'll have to turn back. Are you tracking them?'

'Affirmative,' replied Andre.

'We'll resume this pursuit when the storm passes,' Conally resolved. 'Over and out.'

'That's one big wall of sand, all right,' Tusca commented, viewing the approaching storm via Akbar's horse-cam. 'You would have to be mad not

to seek shelter.'

'Perhaps tracking the band will prove rather fortuitous for them?' Andre was imagining a rosy outcome, where the Arab gratefully gave the keys back to him in gratitude for saving his life.

Static began to creep into the image that Akbar's horse-cam was transmitting as his party penetrated the storm. The signal that marked our target on the monitor also began to weaken.

'Is the storm causing the interference?' I wondered, suppressing my glee as the disruptions intensified.

Tusca was perplexed. She continued typing in a losing battle to restore the transmissions. 'The storm shouldn't affect the signals to this extent.' Tusca, out of ideas, sat back in her seat. The camera window on the monitor turned to total static and the transmitter signal faded completely.

'I guess we need an invitation, after all.' I suppressed my relief at the systems failure.

Andre was staring at the monitor, absolutely devastated. '*Quel cauchemar*,' he uttered, slouching as he conceded defeat.

'A nightmare, indeed,' I echoed. 'Fortunately for you, you don't remember any of it. And from this moment on, I plan to have complete memory failure also.'

Andre and Tusca looked at each other, both carrying a heaviness and guilt that they could not explain. Tusca nodded, thinking it was the best solution for all involved. With a sigh, Andre looked at me and smiled. 'The project was sabotaged by a local religious sect and we barely escaped with our lives. *Fin d'histoire*.'

'*Merci beaucoup*.' I backed up, wanting to make myself absent before Conally returned. I was more than happy to leave Andre and Tusca to do the explaining. 'I'm packing for home.'

EPILOGUE

FROM THE POST-SINAI JOURNAL OF MRS ASHLEE DEVERE

En route back to England I collected Nanny Beat, so that she might fulfil her desire to be nurse to my forthcoming child. It would have been lovely to linger with the gypsies, but with my father's health hanging in the balance I felt the greatest urgency to return home as soon as was humanly possible. I promised to visit the Continent as soon as motherhood and family life allowed, and Devere and I assured Cingar that the Choron clan would always be welcome at the Granville estate in Suffolk.

We made it home by the celebration of Michaelmas. The autumn chill was making itself felt at the Granville manor in Suffolk, where my father had retired to wait out the cold winter months as he did every year now that he was getting older. Since my mother's death he had lost much of his enthusiasm for taking up invitations to visit with other members of the country gentry.

I do not believe that I have ever known my father to be so happy to see me, nor so proud of me for that matter. For all the grand and amazing tales of travel I had to tell him, it was my conception of a child that impressed him most, as he'd felt sure he'd never see the day. Needless to say, my dear Mr Devere was now very much in my father's good books.

'My spirits insist that I am carrying a male child, papa,' I brazenly informed him, and for the first time in his life my father was prepared to wholeheartedly believe one of my predictions.

The news of his forthcoming grandson improved my father's health considerably. He had no intention of leaving this earth before he'd had the opportunity to make an impression on his heir.

Before I set foot on English soil I had packed away my green velvet adventuring guise and weapons; my yen for travel had been satisfied for the present and I felt it was time to assume the role of Mrs Devere, wife, dutiful daughter and soon-to-be mother. The green velvet attire would no longer

stretch around my expanding form in any case, but in the years ahead I would have need of this clothing again.

I also packed away Lord Hamilton's journal. I had found the time to finish reading it on my way home. In the empty volume with the secret compartment, I placed what remained of the bottle of flammable foul-smelling fluid from the Star-Fire Temple. Packing away Albray's stone proved not so easy.

After a long discussion by the fire in my drawing room one evening, having reminisced about our journey together, my knight and I both agreed that if I cherished my marriage, our further association simply wasn't going to work. It wasn't that Devere didn't like Albray. How could he not, when the knight had saved our lives? It was more that my husband wasn't comfortable with another man, even a dead one, being closer to me than he was.

It was Albray who requested that his stone of summons be packed away in the back of Lord Hamilton's hollow journal, and that the volumes, along with my journal, be passed down through the female line of my family.

'But what if I never have a daughter?' I inquired, as Albray had predicted I was having a boy child.

'You shall be far too happy within your marriage to Devere, I fear, for I foresee that you shall be blessed with several children.' The knight's news shocked me. 'Teach them all that you know, and that there is a world of many beliefs out there...none of them perfect, but all worthy of consideration and respect.'

My guardian and I conversed until dawn, and with the coming of the first rays of the new day I dismissed Albray from my life.

I was sad that I had not been the one to free Albray from his curse. Still, as I placed the stone inside the secret compartment, I knew that many years from now, one of my great, great grand-daughters would find this stone and free the knight, just as the black-clad female spirit in the temple had assured me.

It was on a visit to the home of Lord Malory, many years later, that I finally discovered the identity of the dark lady. The lord was the proud owner of a magnificent painting depicting Mary Magdalene's arrival in France, her belly swollen with child. The woman in the painting was the

very image of the mysterious dark lady who had spoken with me in the temple. Obviously this painting was a recent creation and not a portrait of the Great Mother herself, but perhaps she had chosen to present herself to me in this image, knowing that one day I would see this painting and recognise her.

Whatever the reason for the striking coincidence, it was her prediction that influenced me to compile this account of Albray, and the quest to secure the treasures entrusted to our family line. On my honour, every word of this account is true.

Dear daughter, if you are reading this journal and have found the treasure stone of my knight, then perhaps you are the one who will free him? If you do, I assure you that you shall find a friend and guardian beyond reproach, whose wise counsel, bravery and devotion will capture your heart, as surely as it did mine. I am forever in this man's debt, and if you do manage to succeed where I have failed, dear one, then I am forever in your debt also.

Yours, Ashlee Devere

'The pleasure was all mine, Ashlee.' I closed the huge old volume and looked at Albray, who had fallen asleep on my shoulder—an amazing feat since this was his first experience of air travel.

I didn't want to take my eyes off my lover in case he vanished again and sleep hardly seemed so inviting now that my knight was part of my reality. But my body was begging me to shut down my questioning mind and heightened emotions.

I leant my head upon Albray's to get comfortable, when I noted a man, seated across the aisle from us, look away quickly when my gaze fell upon him. Under normal circumstances I would not have thought twice about it, but after reading volumes about secret brotherhoods and manipulating bloodlines and romances, I had become overly paranoid. What if the brothers were still trying to create their superbeing? Surely a match like Albray and myself would be of great interest to them.

Get a grip, Mia. How could anyone possibly know that you are a daughter of Isis, or that Albray is a resurrected Grail prince from the thirteenth century? I comforted myself with the notion that I might look

like someone the fellow knows, or he could be a pervert, or perhaps I had food on my face? I checked my face to eliminate the last possibility.

When I observed him for some time and he didn't give us a second glance, my guard came down along with my eyelids.

I was thinking of Lillet as I began to doze. I did feel a little guilty for stealing the love of her life, but then again the priestess had urged me not to make the same mistakes as she had regarding Albray and I fully intended to follow that advice.

I recognised the lovely garden I was entering, although I had hardly expected that I would have cause to return here.

When I entered through the gate to find Lillet seated beside the fountain where I had found her before, I was a little disappointed. 'What are you still doing here?' I came to stand before her. She rose to greet me, her smile broader than ever I had seen it.

'I have only delayed that I might bid you farewell.' She took hold of both my hands. 'I could not ascend from this place until I thanked you for fulfilling your promise to free Albray and myself.'

'You must know that I require no gratitude for my actions,' I stated very definitely. 'I have been rewarded beyond my wildest expectations, and at your expense, I fear.'

'No,' Lillet corrected. 'The goddess has granted to each of us what we desired the most in life. You have acquired many insights, Albray has found his Grail princess and I shall finally have my union with the creator of all there is. I am to assume my rightful place amongst our foremothers, until such time as I am once again called to take up a physical world incarnation.'

'I promise I shall do all within my power to ensure that it is a better, more aware world for you to return to.' I was carried away by the emotion of the moment, but I did mean what I said. Just how I expected to achieve such a promise was quite beyond my comprehension at present. 'I cannot thank you enough for all your aid.'

Lillet kissed both my cheeks in turn and stepping away she let go of my hands. 'You take good care of our knight.'

I awoke to turbulence and Albray gripping my arm—the violent, bone-rattling jolts our plane was undergoing understandably made him nervous.

‘Just a few air pockets,’ I explained, which didn’t clarify the problem for him, but my lack of panic set him at ease.

The seatbelt sign was on and I fastened my seatbelt, Albray following suit. ‘A good read?’ He motioned to the large journal that had slid down beside me on the seat.

‘Better than any fantasy fiction novel ever,’ I jested, although I didn’t really read the genre. My eyes drifted across the aisle to find that the man who had been watching us earlier was now absent. Everyone had been instructed to return to their seats for landing, so where was he?

‘Surely you still don’t believe it was a work of fiction?’ Albray challenged lightly. Noting my distraction he touched my cheek and drew my focus back to him.

‘Oh, I believe,’ I admitted freely. ‘But no one else would.’ I removed my seatbelt and rose to look for one of our hostesses.

‘Is something the matter?’ Albray quizzed.

‘I’m not too sure.’ I looked for the hostess who came over when I beckoned to her. ‘There was a gentleman seated here earlier.’ I referred her to the vacant seat across the aisle.

The hostess shook her head. ‘The seat was unoccupied,’ she assured me. ‘Please be seated. We’ll be landing in just a few minutes.’

‘My apologies.’ I sat and fastened my seatbelt.

‘You just said that no one would believe your story, but you suspect we are being spied on?’ My knight cocked an eye, confused. ‘So what do you believe?’

‘People move about in aircraft all the time.’ I waved off the mystery. ‘Or perhaps I was dreaming?’ I considered this likely, as I’d certainly been very tired. ‘I am quite sure there is no one following my family line any more.’

‘You think Molier hiring you was an accident then?’ Albray raised a very good point. If Molier had known I was of the blood, then perhaps other persons knew it too? ‘I can tell you that the brothers kept a close eye on the Deveres and all their descendants,’ Albray said.

‘How could you know that, if you never saw Ashlee again after the Sinai adventure?’

‘I never said that I never saw Lady Granville-Devere after that,’ Albray defended.

‘But Ashlee said so, in the epilogue of her journal.’ I raised the mighty book to show him.

Albray placed a hand upon the book, unable to cope with the thought of reading while enduring the erratic motion of the aircraft. ‘I suspect you’ll find other journals written by Ashlee later in life in that big old chest you inherited.’

‘More tales featuring my favourite hero!’ I held his hand in both my own and squeezed, delighted at the prospect of reading more of my great-great-grandmother’s adventures. ‘Did she make any other esoterically groundbreaking discoveries?’

‘*Many*,’ Albray teased. ‘Perhaps you shall be the one to compile a thesis based on your family history and shed light on some of the most ancient of mysteries.’ Albray made this sound like a dare.

The idea was so shocking that I choked on a laugh. ‘Write about this little episode?’ I was horrified by the notion and yet I had already found several interesting avenues to research in the field of modern science. Born in the computer age, I had access to far greater amounts of information than any of my foremothers. What had been merely theory to them, science could now confirm as fact.

‘You do come from a long line of prolific writers,’ Albray encouraged. ‘Both Lillet and Ashlee were always hunched over a blank page, chronicling the events of their life and times. And if they had not made the effort, I doubt you would have survived your recent peril.’

‘I shall certainly consider adding to the accounts in my family inheritance.’ I felt comfortable committing to that.

‘You would not have to publish under your own name,’ Albray continued. ‘And, as you say, it would make a great work of fiction.’ He raised both eyebrows in challenge.

I loved his smile, having so seldom seen it. ‘Perhaps.’

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GLOSSARY OF TERMS

Albigensian Crusade (1209AD): this crusade was directed against Christian heretics in southern France—the Cathars—by the Church of Rome. It was a bitter conflict that was partly a civil war, partly persecution, partly an invasion and possibly a treasure hunt as well. The crusade lasted for twenty years.

Amrita (science): is an enzyme produced in part by the urethral Skene glands (the female prostate). 350BC Aristotle recorded that some women, when sexually excited, produce the Amrita fluid. In Tantric tradition Amrita is called ‘the ambrosia of immortality’ and ‘the fountain of youth’.

The Cathars: were the supporters of *Albi-gens* (see Elven Bloodline), and were the last actively visible Gnostic school in the West. Branded heretics by the Roman Catholic Church, armies descended upon Languedoc and thus began the Albigensian Crusade. Their name Cathari means ‘pure’ in Greek, and it was rumoured that the Cathars were hiding many of the secret treasures relating to the Grail.

Consolamentum (Cathar faith): was a spiritual baptism by fire, executed by the laying on of hands.

The most significant ceremony in Cathar theology, it marked the transition from an ordinary believer or *credenti* to a *Parfait*—one of the elect *Perfecti*. Only a *Parfait* could administer the rite, so that every new *Parfait* was linked to a chain of *Perfecti* that stretched all the way back to the apostles and to Jesus himself. During the ceremony the Holy Spirit would descend to the *Parfait* who was administering the rite and part of the Holy Spirit would then pass into the new *Parfait*’s physical body and permanently inhabit it.

This was why *Parfaits* were expected and willing to lead such austere ascetic lives, and why ordinary believers were prepared to adore them.

Convenenza (Cathar faith): was not *consolamentum*, but it fulfilled the parts of the *consolamentum* that required the candidate to respond and make undertakings. The *consolamentum* could then be administered in the event that the candidate was wounded and could not speak. Thus, *convenenza* was common before battles and during sieges.

Density (esoteric): the eighth sphere—the lowest rate of vibration of the atoms. Inhabited by souls too new in the evolutionary scale to understand physical life whilst in a physical body. They desire to take an unrighteous path and create their own hell plane to inhabit.

Elohim (esoteric & Grail lore): the Shining Ones—the ET beings that created modern humans from earlier human forms by genetic manipulation. Some of the Elohim mated with humans to produce the hybrid races of the Anunnaki and the Nefilim. (Hebrew): the plural reference to the god of Israel—Yahweh.

Elven Bloodline (Grail lore): in the language of old Provence, a female elf was an *albi* and Albi was the name given to the main Cathar stronghold in Languedoc (southern France). Descendants of El and the Elohim (the Shining Ones).

Etheric Double (esoteric): an invisible electromagnetic field that interpenetrates everything in the universe, from the atom to the great central sun. This field absorbs emanations from each thing, forming a pattern for its future existence.

Etheric World (esoteric): the overall picture of invisible space. The atmosphere that contains all seven levels of energies (Seven planes), with their functions and life forms. The Otherworld.

Gnomes (fairy lore): nature spirits made of pure elemental substance, who live underground in mines, hoarding treasure, that are able to shift dimensions. (Grail lore): gnomes and goblins were attendants in the sacred dwellings. They were the custodians of the wealth and wisdom of the ages—the champions of ‘gnosis’.

Grail (Messianic) Bloodline (Grail lore): in medieval times, was the line of Messianic descent that was defined by the French word Sangreal—deriving from the two words Sang Réal, meaning ‘Blood Royal’. This was the Blood Royal of Judah: the kingly line of David which progressed through Jesus and his heirs.

Light-body or Aura (esoteric): an invisible, electromagnetic energy field completely surrounding an entity, acting as a blueprint for that entity, adjusting the vibrational frequency of the atomic structure in accord to that entity’s level of awareness.

Light Centres or Chakra System (esoteric): an invisible, interdimensional system which has seven concentrated centres of energy that are located in

the light-body between the base of the spine and the tip of the head. These are called the root, spleen, solar plexus, heart, throat, third eye and crown chakra. Each of these centres is perceived clairvoyantly as a colourful wheel or flower. These centres convert cosmic energy into body energy and vice versa.

Mitochondrial DNA (mtDNA): is DNA which is not located in the nucleus of the cell but in the mitochondria. MtDNA is typically passed on only from the mother during sexual reproduction and there is little change in the mtDNA from generation to generation, making it a powerful tool for tracking family lineage.

Nature Elemental or Nature Spirit (esoteric/fairy lore): Etheric world beings akin to the four elements of nature, Earth, Air, Fire, and Water. Ranging from a very high to a low level of intelligence, they keep themselves occupied with the development of the natural world and are, understandably, wary of human beings.

ORME (alchemy): also known as The Philosopher's Stone, the Bread of Life (also Light), the White Powder of Gold, *shem* or manna. Is also an acronym for 'Orbitally Rearranged Monatomic Elements' (David Hudson, internet references). ORME is the Highward Fire-Stone, which is also related to Star-Fire—the Fire-Stone—see the books and research of Laurence Gardner.

PGMs—Platinum Group Metals: These eight metals include: ruthenium, rhodium, palladium and silver (light platinum group), and osmium, iridium, platinum and gold (heavy platinum group). These precious metals can, in a monatomic high-spin state, lose their chemical reactivity and metallic nature, resulting in a state of superconductivity—a resonant condition complete with Meissner magnetic fields, Cooper Pairs, and electrons which have literally changed into light (photons). These precious metals have the unique ability to remain stable in an ORME form, resulting in levitation (weight losses), fundamental biological and human physiological effects and beyond to applications in Zero-Point Energy exploration.

Prieurè de Sion (Grail lore): *the Prieurè du Notre Dame du Sion* or *Priory of Zion* is said to have had its earliest roots in Hermetic and Gnostic thought. In 1070, a group of crusading knights are said to have formed the basis for the Order de Sion, into which they were pledged in 1099 by Godfroi de Bouillion. For a century the Knights Templar and Sion were

unified under one leadership, though they publicly separated at the ‘cutting of the elm’ at Gisors in 1188. The Templar order was eventually destroyed by King Phillippe Le Bel of France in 1307. Sion are also linked to numerous other underground schools of thought—Rosicrucians, Freemasonry, Arthurian and Grail legends, Catharism, etc.

Sangreal (Grail lore): In English translation, the term Sangreal became ‘San Graal’. When written more fully it was ‘Saint Grail’—the word ‘saint’ related to ‘holy’, thus came the familiar term ‘Holy Grail’—see the books and research of Laurence Gardner.

Sangreal knighthood (Grail lore): the Sovereign Order of the Sangreal or the Knights of the Holy Grail—was a dynastic Order of Scotland’s Royal House of Stewart.

Seven Bodies of Man (esoteric): the Physical body, Astral body, Mental body, Causal body, the Spirit, Monadic essence and god consciousness.

Seven (higher) Planes of Existence Physical, Astral, Mental, Causal, Spiritual, Monadic and god consciousness.

Star-Fire (Grail lore): the organic equivalent of ORME, given to select kings prior to the human use of the ORME—essentially the menstrual blood of the ‘goddesses’ of the Anunnaki (see Elohim).

Shade (esoteric): an astral corpse of a disincarnate entity left behind to disintegrate after the soul-mind (spirit) has withdrawn to higher realms of existence taking with it all higher wisdom. Not to be confused with a ghost whose spirit is trapped in the physical realm—usually due to tragic death, or some unfinished business in the world that must be realised and resolved before the soul-mind can progress to higher planes of existence.

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About the Author

Traci Harding lives on the Hawkesbury River, with her husband David and their two beautiful children, Sarah and John.

Traci has written two best-selling trilogies—*The Ancient Future Trilogy* and *The Celestial Triad*—as well as three standalone novels, *The Alchemist's Key*, *Ghostwriting*, and *Book of Dreams*. Traci is currently working on the second book of the Mystique trilogy, to be released in 2006.

Thanks to the web team at HarperCollins, Traci has a very lively website and she visits the message board in the community section daily to discuss the greater mysteries with her readers. At the website there are glossaries of the terms used in Traci's books and there are author notes for those interested in delving deeper into all aspects of this author's work.

Visit Traci Harding's new website and message board at:

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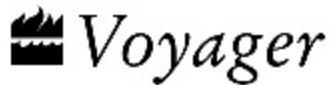
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pl38 extract from 'La Belle Dame Sans Merci', a poem by John Keats, 1820 p600 quotations from the Proverbs of Solomon: 22:17; 23:10; 15:6; 23:4 (Bible, KJV)



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